

## 5.5. Repeat Spreaders

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of false or misleading information in our dataset. Right-leaning accounts also more frequently augmented their misinformation posts with narrative-related hashtags, such as #StopTheSteal and #DeadVoters, which persisted across multiple incidents and were shared millions of times in our dataset.<sup>14</sup> Most unique about right-leaning accounts, however, was their frequent involvement in many tickets. Whereas almost all of the most influential left-leaning accounts were involved in only one or two incidents of false or misleading information, many right-leaning accounts with large audiences were involved with upwards of 10, and were often responsible for seeding or catalyzing an incident's spread through the conservative, right-wing, and pro-Trump Twitter networks.

## 5.5 Repeat Spreaders

In this analysis, we attempt to identify entities—e.g., Twitter accounts, Facebook Pages, and YouTube channels—that played a significant role in the spread of multiple election integrity incidents, such as the ones identified above in Section 5.3 on page 183. Expanding upon our pre-election analysis of influential Twitter accounts, we refer to these entities as “repeat spreaders.”<sup>15</sup>

### Repeat Spreader Twitter Accounts

First, we look at the most influential Twitter accounts across election integrity incidents in terms of shaping the flow of information. We identify accounts that produced highly retweeted original tweets (retweeted more than 1,000 times) across multiple incidents. Table 5.2 on the next page lists the accounts that appeared across the most incidents ( $\geq 10$ ) along with relevant details for each account.

The 21 most prominent repeat spreaders on Twitter—accounts that played a significant role in disseminating multiple false or misleading narratives that threatened election integrity—include political figures and organizations, partisan media outlets, and social media all-stars. Perhaps a reflection on both the nature of information threats to election integrity and our process for identifying them (see Chapter 2 for a note on the limitations of our approach), all 21 of the repeat spreaders were associated with conservative or right-wing political views and support of President Trump, and all featured in the politically “right” cluster in our network graph in Figure 5.1 on the facing page. Notably, 15 of the top spreaders of election misinformation were verified, blue-check accounts.

President Trump and his two older sons figure prominently in the Twitter dataset. In addition, several GOP political figures, along with leaders of conservative political organizations, repeatedly spread misleading narratives on Twitter. Charlie Kirk of Turning Point USA, for example, posted three tweets at

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Rank	Account	Verified	Incidents	Tweets w/ >1000 Retweets	Followers	Retweets in Incidents	Left or Right
1	RealJamesWoods	True	27	36	2,738,431	403,950	Right
2	gatewaypundit	True	25	45	424,431	200,782	Right
3	DonaldJTrumpJr	True	24	27	6,392,929	460,044	Right
4	realDonaldTrump	True	21	43	88,965,710	1,939,362	Right
4	TomFitton	True	21	29	1,328,746	193,794	Right
6	JackPosobiec	True	20	41	1,211,549	188,244	Right
7	catturd2	False	17	20	436,601	66,039	Right
8	EricTrump	True	16	25	4,580,170	484,425	Right
9	ChuckCallesto	True	15	17	311,517	117,281	Right
10	charliekirk11	True	13	18	1,915,729	232,967	Right
11	marklevinshow	True	12	10	2,790,699	90,157	Right
11	cjtruth	False	12	27	256,201	66,698	Right
11	JamesOKeefeIII	False	12	64	1,021,505	625,272	Right
11	prayingmedic	False	12	26	437,976	57,165	Right
15	RichardGrenell	True	11	12	691,441	143,363	Right
15	pnjaban	True	11	14	208,484	58,417	Right
17	BreitbartNews	True	10	11	1,647,070	38,405	Right
17	TheRightMelissa	False	10	31	497,635	73,932	Right
17	mikeroman	False	10	10	29,610	128,726	Right
17	robbystarbuck	True	10	15	204,355	65,651	Right
17	seanhannity	True	10	22	5,599,939	96,641	Right

Table 5.2: Repeat Spreaders: Twitter accounts that were highly retweeted across multiple incidents. Twitter has since suspended the accounts ofrealDonaldTrump (January 6), The Gateway Pundit (February 6), cjtruth, and prayingmedic (January 8).<sup>16</sup> Account verification status as of 11/10/2020.

critical times that helped to catalyze the spread of Sharpiegate (see Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 Figure 4.6 on page 167). James O’Keefe, founder of Project Veritas, is also a significant repeat spreader. We discuss in more detail the activities of President Trump and his sons, as well as James O’Keefe and Project Veritas, below in Section 5.6.

Far-right hyperpartisan media outlets also participated in a wide range of incidents, including The Gateway Pundit, which ranked #2 in the dataset; Breitbart News; and two Fox News hosts. The Gateway Pundit (Twitter suspended this account on February 6, 2021) and Breitbart News are examined fully in Section 5.6 on page 195. The remainder of the repeat spreader accounts include a range of right-wing social media influencers—James Woods, conservative celebrity and actor, tops the list.

Many of these accounts follow others in this group, and their networks of followers overlap as well. They also actively promote and spread each others’ content. Once content from misleading narratives entered this right-wing Twitter network, it often spread quickly across influential accounts and out to

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their overlapping audiences, making it very difficult to slow down or correct.

### Domains Cited in Incidents (in the Twitter Data)

Next, using the same tweet data, we identified the most prominent domains across election integrity incidents. We identified domains that were highly tweeted (linked to by more than 500 tweets or retweets) in multiple incidents. Table 5.3 lists the domains that appeared across the most incidents ( $\geq 7$ ) along with relevant details for each account. Domains within this list may be cited for different reasons—some (the *Washington Post*, for example) appear in this table for articles that debunked false claims and narratives.

Rank	Domain	Incidents	# Original Tweets	Total Retweets	≈% Left Spread	≈% Right Spread
1	www.thegatewaypundit.com	46	29,207	840,740	0.08%	99.92%
2	www.breitbart.com	26	8,569	394,689	0.94%	99.06%
3	www.youtube.com	21	14,040	269,996	2.51%	97.49%
4	www.washingtonpost.com	18	1,986	74,360	84.76%	15.23%
5	www.foxnews.com	14	1,330	34,143	0.91%	99.09%
6	www.theepochtimes.com	12	2,167	86,325	0.00%	100.00%
7	nypost.com	11	4,513	178,176	2.27%	97.73%
8	www.zerohedge.com	10	1,043	27,687	0.52%	99.48%
8	www.cnn.com	10	1,269	100,642	89.28%	10.71%
10	apnews.com	9	432	13,067	33.84%	66.14%
10	justthenews.com	9	1,035	61,305	0.00%	100.00%
10	www.nytimes.com	9	776	50,021	63.88%	36.11%
10	thedcpatriot.com	9	572	26,417	0.00%	99.99%
14	gellerreport.com	8	516	15,075	0.00%	99.99%
14	thenationalpulse.com	8	770	39,160	0.00%	99.99%
14	nationalfile.com	8	4,443	195,489	0.51%	99.48%
17	www.washingtontimes.com	7	280	11,445	1.45%	98.54%
17	www.pscp.tv	7	2,067	83,269	0.47%	99.53%
17	saraacarter.com	7	531	81,172	1.39%	98.60%
17	www.washingtonexam- iner.com	7	1,518	75,939	0.98%	99.02%

Table 5.3: Domains, extracted from tweets, that were highly tweeted ( $>500$ ) across multiple incidents. Shortened URLs were followed when possible to extract original domains. The incident count includes the number of incidents for which the domain was linked to in over 500 tweets or retweets in our incident-related Twitter data. The original tweets are the count of non-retweets (including quote tweets and replies) that mentioned the domain within those incidents, while the total retweets column is a count of the retweets, both from within our incident-linked Twitter data. Finally, the estimated right/left spread is the proportion of original tweets made by influential users classified on the ideological spectrum based on our network analysis, above. Users not included in that network analysis are excluded from the estimate.

The top 20 domains involved in spreading or discussing false or misleading information included both partisan and mainstream media outlets—which played

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markedly different roles in the information incidents (primarily spreading vs. primarily correcting). The two most significant domains in our incident-related data belonged to partisan outlets: The Gateway Pundit ([www.thegatewaypundit.com](http://www.thegatewaypundit.com)) and Breitbart ([www.breitbart.com](http://www.breitbart.com)). Fox News again appears on the list; other notable partisan news outlets are described in Appendix C on page 251.

A number of “mainstream” media sites also appear in our list of frequent domains—often picked up within the left-leaning clusters in our network map. Though this may suggest a somewhat equal share of participation in misinformation on the political left and right, the majority of stories cited on “the left” were referenced as fact-checks on the associated incidents or narratives. For instance, a story from CNN that challenges the Trump campaign’s claims of deceased voters is representative of the corrective role these sites played within the spread of these misleading narratives.<sup>17</sup>

A couple of incidents of false or misleading information did run through the left, including a story about unauthorized voting boxes being set up by Republicans—a true story, but one that falsely framed the motive and exaggerated the impact of such actions. The story was covered by “mainstream” media sites including AP News, the *New York Times*, CNN, and the *Washington Post*, all included in our list of frequent domains. A discarded-mail incident was framed by the left as the Trump administration’s effort to harm the mail-in voting process. CNN, in particular, was cited in that USPS ballot-dumping narrative—though for content that did not explicitly invoke the election integrity frame.

The presence of both YouTube ([youtube.com](http://youtube.com)) and Periscope ([pscp.tv](http://pscp.tv)) in the highly tweeted domain list illustrates the cross-platform nature of misleading election-related narratives.

YouTube data is further discussed below. Interestingly, in our election-integrity related data, both YouTube and Periscope were primarily tweeted by accounts on the political right or pro-Trump side of the network (see Figure 5.1 on page 186).

In summary, though a few false or misleading narratives about the integrity of the 2020 election did run through the left, when we look at the domains that repeatedly helped to spread—as opposed to correct—election-related misinformation, we find an array of predominantly right-wing and pro-Trump partisan media outlets.

### Repeat Spreaders: YouTube Channels in the Twitter Data

YouTube played a prominent role in the spread of false and misleading information across the election integrity incidents we analyzed, ranking third among most linked-to domains overall. In at least 44 distinct incidents, YouTube videos were tweeted more than 10 times.

## 5.5. Repeat Spreaders

From our corpus of data, we identified the YouTube channels that were repeat spreaders within the Twitter discourse—i.e., those that repeatedly used YouTube to disseminate multiple false and/or misleading narratives. To do this we first extracted all of the YouTube links from our incident data and used the YouTube API to determine what channels posted the videos. We then identified channels that were highly tweeted—linked to more than ten times in an incident—for multiple election integrity incidents. This provided a corpus of 665 videos from 411 unique YouTube channels.<sup>18</sup> Table 5.4 lists the top 12 repeat spreader channels (>4 incidents) that arose from this analysis.

Rank	Channel	Incidents	Total Tweets	Videos	YouTube Views
1	Project Veritas	7	128,734	26	9,613,437
1	CDMedia	7	258,314	1	691,395
3	Donald J Trump	6	4,338	10	10,849,373
3	One America News Network	6	207,544	15	4,034,274
3	GOP War Room	6	186,106	8	1,732,847
3	Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai	6	196,292	1	1,052,429
7	Gateway Pundit	5	10,015	13	4,085,657
8	NewsNOW from FOX	4	406	7	9,450,514
8	StevenCrowder	4	15,490	3	8,159,462
8	BlazeTV	4	314	6	3,900,083
8	Judicial Watch	4	1,333	7	511,568
8	MR. OBVIOUS	4	283	5	401,481

Table 5.4: Repeat Spreaders: YouTube channels that were highly tweeted ( $\geq 10$  times/incident) across multiple ( $\geq 4$ ) incidents.

The channels found to be repeat spreaders of false and misleading narratives through YouTube look similar to the repeat spreaders on Twitter—right-wing influencers, hyperpartisan media outlets such as One America News Network (OANN) and The Gateway Pundit, political groups supportive of President Trump such as Project Veritas, and President Trump himself. These channels attracted millions of views for content related to known incidents of misinformation surrounding the 2020 election.

Two channels, compilation video creators Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai and CDMedia, were remarkable in that they appeared in our top repeat spreader list for being cited in multiple incidents, but for only a single video. Dr. Ayyadurai is discussed as a prominent repeat spreader in Section 5.6 on page 195.

## Repeat Spreaders: Facebook Pages & Groups and Instagram

For our Facebook and Instagram analysis, we identified accounts (public Pages and Groups for Facebook, public accounts for Instagram) that were highly engaged with across multiple incidents. Aligning with the threshold used for

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accounts in our Twitter analysis, a post had to receive at least 1,000 likes or favorites to be counted as part of an incident. In this way, we were looking for accounts that were influential across incidents. The total engagement column for Facebook is the sum of likes (and other emotive reactions), comments, and shares. For Instagram, the total engagements are the sum of favorites and comments. Tables 5.5 and 5.6 on page 194 feature the accounts that appeared across the most incidents.

Rank	Account Name	Facebook Page/Group	# of Incidents	# of Posts	Total Engagement
1	Breitbart	Page	8	20	831,452
1	The Silent Majority	Page	8	7	69,763
3	Heather Cox Richardson	Page	6	8	816,755
3	David J Harris Jr.	Page	6	11	282,652
3	James O'Keefe	Page	6	20	194,596
3	Project Veritas	Page	6	20	165,377
7	NowThis Politics	Page	5	11	244,023
7	Team Trump	Page	5	5	153,118
7	Ryan Fournier	Page	5	6	67,885
7	Wendy Bell Radio	Page	5	6	62,020
7	#WalkAway Campaign	Group	5	12	51,854
7	StandwithMueller	Page	5	7	19,345

Table 5.5: Repeat Spreaders: Facebook Pages and public Groups that were highly engaged with ( $\geq 1000$  engagements) across multiple ( $\geq 5$ ) incidents.

### Facebook

Table 5.5 shows the top 12 public Facebook Pages and Groups that repeatedly shared content about the incidents in our dataset. From this data, we see that public Facebook Pages (and not public Facebook Groups) tended to appear more frequently as repeat spreaders. Only one Facebook Group appeared as a repeat spreader. This may not be surprising, as many Groups that played a role in the spread of election-related misinformation are either private (so would not be accessible via CrowdTangle) or have been removed from Facebook.<sup>19</sup> Facebook's longer format provided an opportunity for Pages to host long, detailed posts that contain false claims and misleading narratives that spanned multiple incidents.

Among the repeat spreaders in the Facebook data, we see several familiar names, including Breitbart, James O'Keefe, and Project Veritas. Short-form videos were popular on the official Facebook account of Team Trump, which does not appear to be officially associated with the Trump campaign.

Most of the repeat spreaders in the Facebook list are, similar to what we see in the Twitter and YouTube data, right-leaning and/or Trump-supporting entities.



## 5.5. Repeat Spreaders

However, we do see three left-leaning Pages among the group—NowThis Politics, StandwithMueller, and historian Heather Cox Richardson. The inclusion of all three is primarily the result of their Pages attempting to fact-check or otherwise counter false or misleading information about the election. For example, the NowThis Politics post below attempts to correct post-election misinformation, quoting the Trump campaign in its text.

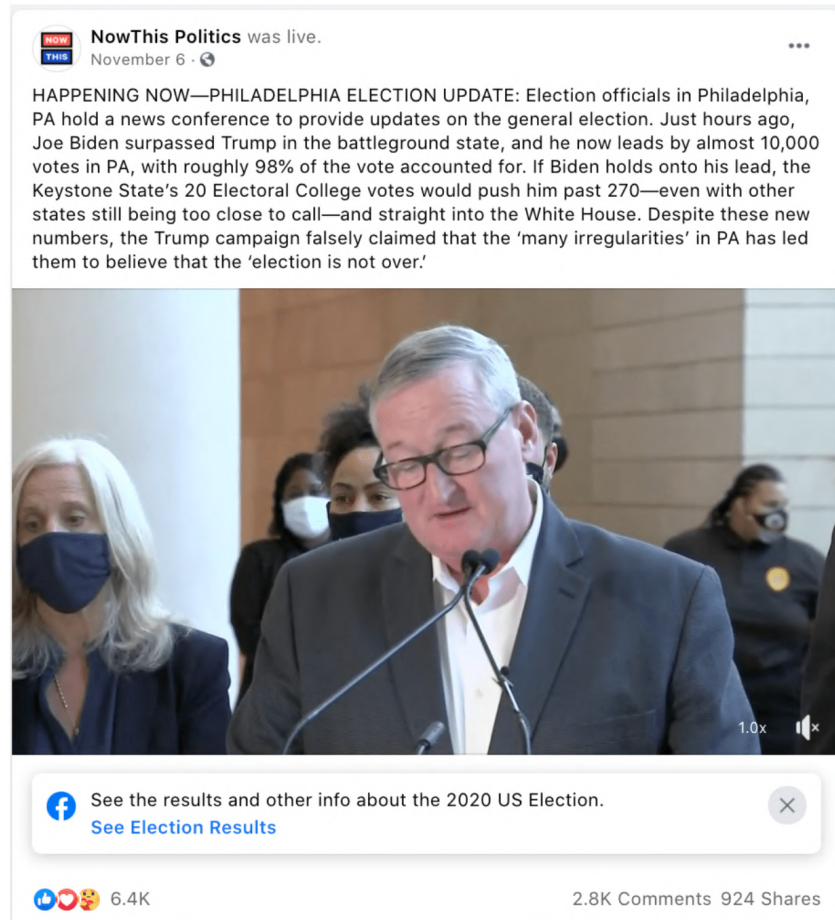


Figure 5.2: An example of a NowThis Politics Facebook post discussing Trump campaign claims included in the data.

## Instagram

The Instagram repeat spreaders list (see Table 5.6 on the next page) looks somewhat similar to our Twitter list, containing accounts of partisan media organizations (e.g., The Gateway Pundit, Breitbart), and public individuals (e.g., James O’Keefe).

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Rank	Account Name	Verified	# of Incidents	# of Posts	Total Engagement
1	KAGBABE 2.O	Not verified	12	33	80,484
2	Breitbart	Verified	10	14	670,577
2	The Gateway Pundit	Not verified	10	20	132,440
4	James O’Keefe	Verified	6	20	410,335
4	Baller Alert	Verified	6	7	102,837
6	Michael Hennessey	Not verified	5	82	169,623
6	Occupy Democrats	Not verified	5	5	51,289
6	Latinos With Trump	Not verified	5	14	47,167
6	Ben & Hannah	Not verified	5	11	19,529
6	#HisNameWasSethRich 🇺🇸	Not verified	5	7	18,814

Table 5.6: Repeat Spreaders: Facebook Pages and public Groups that were highly engaged with ( $\geq 1000$  engagements) across multiple ( $\geq 5$ ) incidents.

Unlike our Twitter list, most of the other accounts on the Instagram list are not verified. We see a few new names that we do not see anywhere else, like KAGBABE 2.O—an anonymous account that showed up in the most incidents—Baller Alert, Michael Hennessey/Snowflake News, Latinos with Trump, Ben & Hannah, and HisNameWasSethRich.

An account we see among the Instagram repeat spreaders is the left-leaning group “Occupy Democrats.” Their Facebook Page also appeared in a few incidents (though not enough to make the list of top spreaders in Table 5-5). In at least two cases, Occupy Democrats was picked up in our data for trying to correct misinformation related to an incident. In others, they spread information that functioned to fan fears of voter disenfranchisement and intimidation.

For example, a tweet went viral on October 20, 2020, depicting an officer wearing a Trump mask at a polling station in Miami.<sup>20</sup> Within an hour, the Miami Police Department publicly condemned the actions of the officer.<sup>21</sup> Despite the official condemnation, Occupy Democrats reposted the image through both its Instagram and Facebook accounts. Its posts urged people to report the officer to the non-emergency police line. Both posts created a lot of engagement. There is no evidence to support the claim that this was part of an organized police-led voter intimidation campaign, which appears in the embedded meme in the Occupy Democrats Facebook post in Figure 5.3 on the facing page. That framing was both false and, while it likely functioned to rile Occupy Democrats followers on the left, also carried a risk of suppressing voter turnout by fomenting fears around voter intimidation at the polls (a concept covered in Chapter 3 with the “Army for Trump” example).<sup>22</sup>



## 5.6. An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

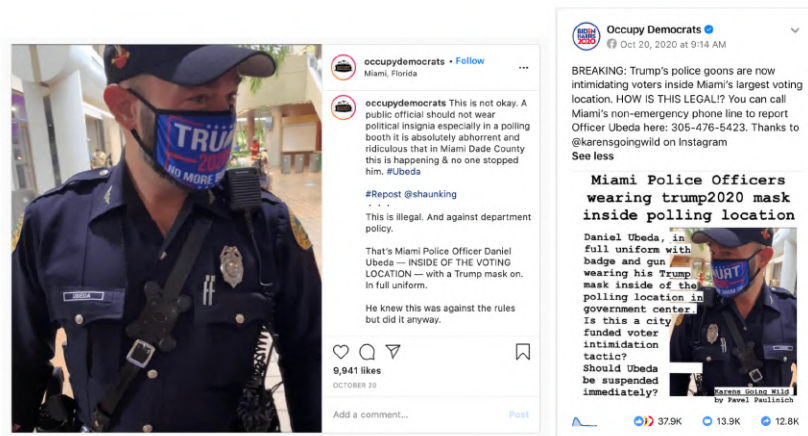


Figure 5.3: Screenshots of posts by Occupy Democrats about the incident, with specific instructions in the Facebook post (right) to call Miami's non-emergency line to report the officer, both after Miami PD's official response.

## 5.6 An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

In this section, we provide an integrated view, looking at how some of the most active and prominent repeat spreaders pushed false and misleading narratives about the election across platforms.

### President Trump, His Family, and the Trump Campaign

Though the specific claims and narratives often originated elsewhere, the Trump family and the Trump campaign regularly amplified incidents of false and misleading information—especially false claims of election fraud—across multiple platforms. President Trump's official Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) participated in 21 distinct incidents and was the most highly retweeted in all of our incident-related data (Twitter permanently suspended his account on January 8, 2021).<sup>23</sup> His YouTube channel put out videos that linked to six distinct incidents, making him tied for third, and that were viewed more than any other repeat spreader's videos. And his Facebook official account was the most engaged-with account in all of our Facebook data.

President Trump's adult sons Donald Jr. and Eric were involved in 24 and 16 incidents respectively; Donald Jr. was the third most prominent Twitter user in the incident-related data. Between them, the president, Donald Jr., and Eric Trump spread and reinforced narratives questioning the security of the mail-in voting process, ballot harvesting claims, several different narratives about poll

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watchers being denied access and other questionable “whistleblower” claims, and the Dominion conspiracy theory.

These cases capture solely when Donald Trump or his campaign produced content (posts, videos, tweets) related to an incident. In addition to content production, the Trump team regularly used retweets to amplify content by hyperpartisan media outlets and other accounts. Leading up to the election, we described one incident in which Donald Trump Jr. amplified a ballot harvesting narrative produced by Project Veritas (see Figure 3.16 on page 66 in Chapter 3).<sup>24</sup> Similar amplification events occurred involving Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai, The Gateway Pundit, Breitbart, and other hyperpartisan outlets. Owing to their large following, members of the Trump family—and a broader array of accounts associated with their campaign—were able to catalyze the spread of election fraud narratives. Their role in the spread of misinformation was therefore multidimensional—through both content production and content amplification.

Their activity also extended beyond social media. Claims of electoral fraud were pushed by members of the Trump family, the Trump campaign, and other surrogates on cable news, through press briefings, and eventually within numerous court cases. Perhaps the most important role the Trump inner circle played was to seed and perpetuate the prevailing narrative—the general notion of a “rigged election.”

### **The Gateway Pundit**

The Gateway Pundit was among the most active spreaders of election-related misinformation in our analyses. The outlet used a cross-platform strategy, hosting content on its website and using other channels to promote both its own and others’ content. It appeared as a top repeat spreader through its website, its Twitter account, its YouTube channel, and its Instagram account. (Twitter suspended the account on February 6, 2021).<sup>25</sup>

Figure 5.4 on the facing page shows the relative engagement with The Gateway Pundit’s content over time and across platforms within our incident-related data.

Unlike some of the other entities featured here, The Gateway Pundit was highly active throughout the election lifecycle, including during the weeks leading up to the election, when it repeatedly spread content—in distinct information incidents—that sought to undermine trust in mail-in voting specifically and the eventual election results more generally. It participated in seeding and spreading misleading information about ballots being harvested, chased, dumped, stolen, and miscounted. It spread false narratives of election fraud built upon

## 5.6. An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

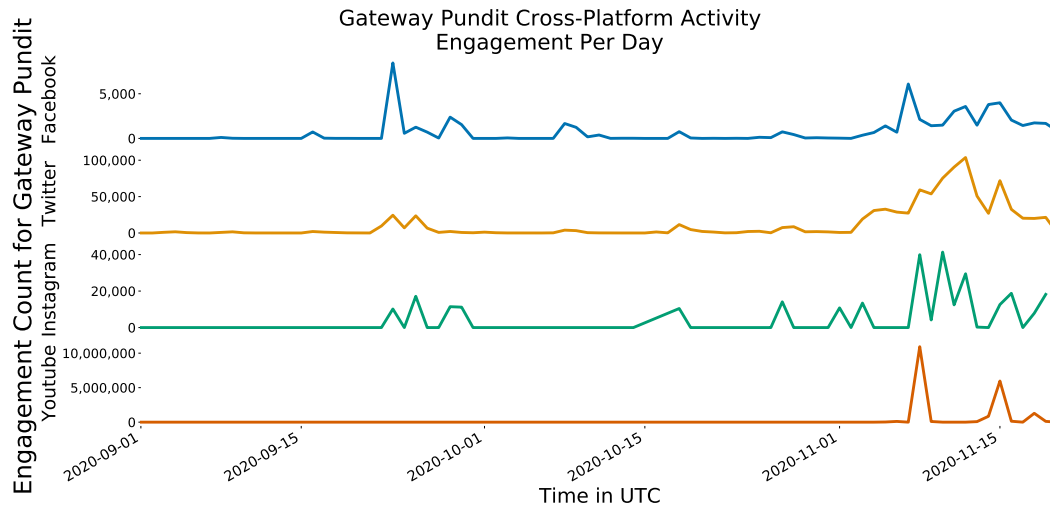


Figure 5.4: Engagements per day for The Gateway Pundit. Facebook engagements are in blue, Twitter retweets in orange, and Instagram likes in green.

misinterpretations of statistics and was active in spreading the false Dominion conspiracy theory.

On Twitter, The Gateway Pundit's account was highly retweeted across 26 different incidents (#2 among repeat spreaders). Evidence from our data suggest that its prominence was due both to production of its own material and to amplification (via original and quote tweets) of other partisan content. It repeatedly interacted with content and accounts of other repeat spreaders and influencers, including Project Veritas, as shown in Figure 5.5.



Figure 5.5: Quote tweet by @JamesOKeefeIII (the founder of Project Veritas) of a tweet by Jim Hoft (the operator of @gatewaypundit). Hoft's tweet links to an article on thegatewaypundit.com, which promotes a video released by Project Veritas.

Of all the domains linked to in our Twitter data, The Gateway Pundit's website was connected to the largest number of incidents (46) while also garnering the

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most related original tweets (29,207) and retweets (840,750). Their YouTube channel appeared in five incidents, and their 13 incident-related videos had more than 4 million views on YouTube.

The Gateway Pundit was not as visible in the Facebook data we collected, but its Instagram account was tied for #2 among repeat spreaders, appearing in 10 incidents for 20 posts that received more than 132,000 engagements.

### **Breitbart News**

Breitbart News, a right-wing, online media outlet, was also a cross-platform repeat spreader—pushing false and misleading narratives about the election through their website, Twitter account, Facebook Page, and Instagram account. In terms of number of different false or misleading information incidents that they helped to spread, they were #1 on Facebook (8 incidents), #2 on Instagram (10 incidents), and #2 among linked-to websites in the Twitter data (26 incidents). On Facebook and Instagram, they had the highest engagement among repeat spreaders.

Breitbart participated in a wide range of ballot-related incidents, such as mail-dumping and ballot harvesting, voting machine issues, and now-debunked claims that statistical anomalies suggest widespread election fraud. It both produced its own content and propagated stories that initially rose to prominence on other domains. Often, it picked up content found elsewhere online and reframed that content within its own articles. However, Breitbart tended to be more careful than The Gateway Pundit and others in how it framed events to subtly connect them to potential issues of voter fraud without explicitly making those claims.

### **Newsmax Media**

Newsmax Media (formerly NewsMax) is a conservative media outlet that produces content through its website, cable news channel, and various social media accounts—including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Especially active in the aftermath of the election, Newsmax repeatedly posted videos—across their many media channels—where they hosted guests that made unsupported and in many cases outright false claims about election fraud. The outlet appears in several incidents in our data, from Stop The Steal and Sharpiegate to the Dominion and Hammer and Scorecard conspiracy theories.

The Newsmax website is most visible in our data for seeding a misinformation incident through a video interview (available on their website) claiming that the head of the Federal Election Commission, Trey Trainor, believed that voter fraud was occurring in states still counting ballots. Newsmax also hosted a pundit who claimed that the Democrats were attempting a “coup” and ran several segments

## 5.6. An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

containing false accusations about companies involved in the manufacture and software development for voting machines.

Perhaps more interesting than the specific incidents that Newsmax was involved in spreading is how the media outlet vastly increased its visibility in this discourse immediately following the election. Figure 5.6 shows engagement (likes and comments) across platforms with Newsmax content related to incidents of false or misleading information about the election. Prior to November 3, Newsmax was not a significant part of these conversations. But after the election, the media outlet began to gain attention—quite rapidly—for its coverage of election fraud claims.

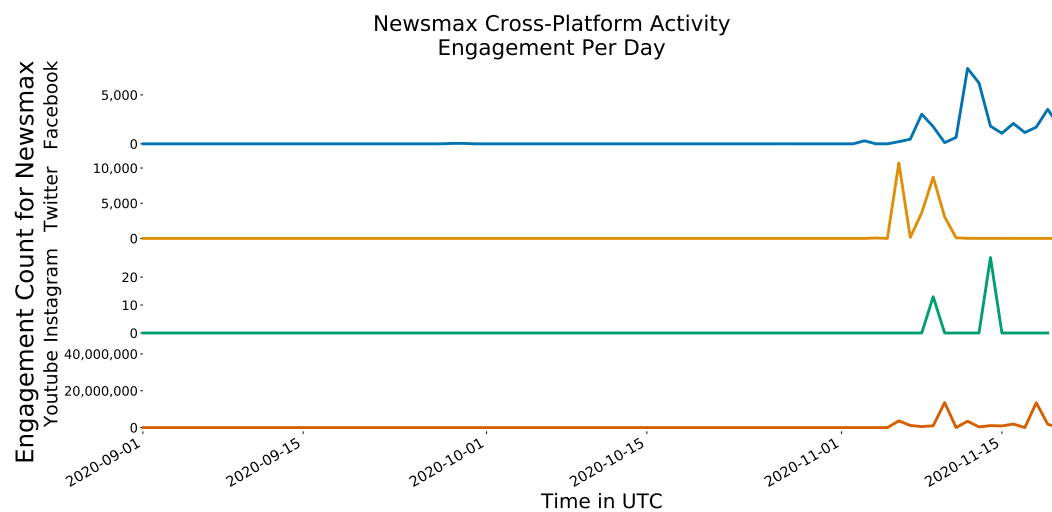


Figure 5.6: Engagements per day for Newsmax in incident-related data. Facebook is in blue, Twitter retweets in orange, Instagram in green, and YouTube in red.

Gains in engagements on Newsmax's content were accompanied by gains in followers for their accounts on various social media platforms—translating to a potentially long-term visibility increase for the outlet. Figure 5.7 on the next page shows followers over time for Newsmax's Twitter and Instagram accounts. Both demonstrate a sharp increase in early November. The Twitter graph (which we can generate at a much higher granularity) indicates that the first sharp increase occurs at about 4:00 am UTC on November 3 (11:00 pm EST on election night). Much of that may be attributable to their election night projections, including a tweet erroneously announcing that President Trump had won the state of Georgia. The @newsmax Twitter account would continue to gain followers over the course of the post-election period—growing by nearly 300% in two weeks (from 232,000 on November 2 to 668,000 on November 15)—as their content began to coalesce around false claims of election fraud. Their Instagram account saw an even more remarkable gain, from 47,400 followers on October

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31 to 318,500 followers on November 14 (an increase of more than 600%).

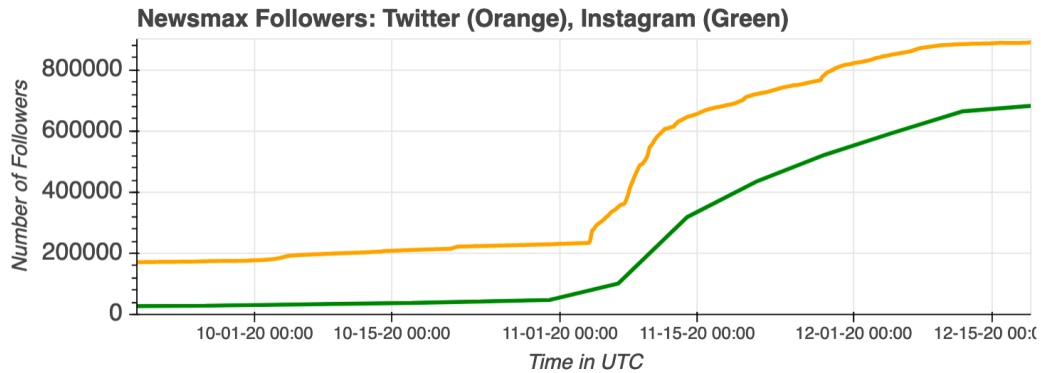


Figure 5.7: Newsmax followers growth on Twitter (orange) and Instagram (green).

During the post-election period (November 3 to November 15), Newsmax also began to promote themselves as a pro-Trump alternative to Fox News, which was being criticized for, among other things, calling Arizona for Biden. Reflecting what appears to be a strategy of staking claim to the right-wing and pro-Trump media market, on November 8 Newsmax bragged that they were the “only major news network to not call the election.”

Later, Newsmax would be legally pressured to post “clarifications” to many of the false accusations that they aired.<sup>26</sup> But it’s likely that their reputational boost—in terms of followers on their social media accounts—from posting the original false claims was not significantly diminished by the later corrections.

### Project Veritas

The data show that Project Veritas was a prominent repeat spreader of false and misleading information about the 2020 election across multiple platforms, through both the organization’s accounts and the personal accounts of its founder, James O’Keefe. (Twitter permanently suspended Project Veritas’s official account and temporarily locked James O’Keefe’s on February 11, 2021.) They produced several videos in the form of “investigative reports” that they hosted on YouTube and their official website. They used their other social media channels—where they were connected to a network of other large-audience, blue-check conservative and pro-Trump accounts—to advertise and disseminate their videos.

As a montage view of their YouTube videos shows, Project Veritas produced videos that repeatedly challenged the integrity of electoral procedures, election and postal service officials, and ultimately the results of the election (see Figure 5.8 on the facing page).



## 5.6. An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

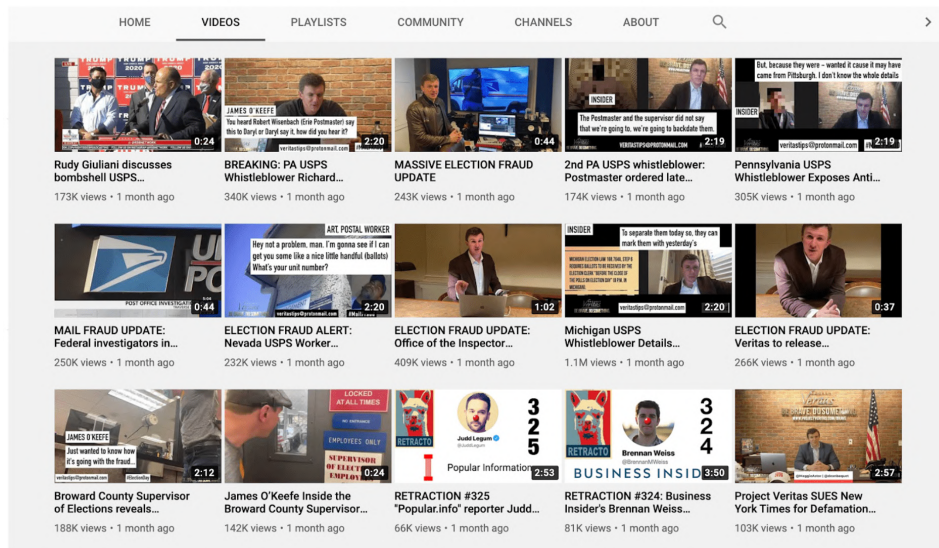


Figure 5.8: Project Veritas's YouTube Page containing a number of their investigative reports on election fraud.

Project Veritas videos maintain a consistent, signature style: they begin with founder James O'Keefe describing the alleged fraud their video exposes before moving on to undercover videos or anonymized interviews that are presented as “proof” of their claims. The videos are highly edited, with often incomplete narratives. Notably, the subjects of some of the videos Project Veritas released were found to be unreliable sources—for example, the political operative whistleblowing about alleged ballot-harvesting by the Ilhan Omar campaign later revealed he was offered a \$10,000 bribe to make up the story.<sup>27</sup>

Though Project Veritas claimed to face deplatforming efforts on Twitter during the 2020 election cycle (ostensibly for violating Twitter's civic integrity policies), they were highly successful at disseminating their content throughout the 2020 election.<sup>28</sup> In addition to their engagement on YouTube, the group gained 5.8 million views on videos they uploaded to their Facebook Page in 2020 and over 12 million views on their Instagram videos. Their success, in part, can be attributed to James O'Keefe, who uses his personal platform and connections with other conservative influencers to direct attention to their video content, hosted across multiple platforms. O'Keefe's personal Twitter account (@JamesOKeefeIII) appeared in 12 of our election integrity incidents and garnered over 625,000 retweets, primarily for posts promoting Project Veritas's content.

O'Keefe's Facebook Pages were often used nearly identically to his Twitter account, complete with the use of hashtags, short-form statements on particular incidents, and linked videos, as seen in Figure 5.9 on the next page.

## 5. Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation



Figure 5.9: Identical posts by James O'Keefe on both Facebook (left) and Twitter (right).

In the lead-up to the election, Project Veritas focused their efforts on sowing doubt in the integrity of mail-in voting by pushing narratives around ballot harvesting and what they term “ballot chasing.” They released several videos on their YouTube channel that claimed various campaigns (of primarily down-ballot races) were engaging in illegal ballot harvesting and facilitating mail-in voter fraud, including one accusing Representative Ilhan Omar. Project Veritas promoted the drop of the video on Twitter prior to releasing it on YouTube (see Figure 3.14 on page 65 in Chapter 3). Following its release, the video was linked to by multiple prominent partisan media news sites such as The National Pulse, whose stories were further amplified by retweets by Donald Trump Jr. The cross-platform attention drew users to the video on YouTube, resulting in nearly 1.2 million views. O'Keefe capitalized on the attention garnered by the video to release multiple subsequent undercover reports on alleged election fraud. Subsequent videos failed to gain as much traction, but still consistently garnered at least 100,000 views on YouTube.

After the election, Project Veritas began producing videos of “whistleblowers” alleging fraudulent behaviors in swing states—this included a video testimonial from a Pennsylvania postal worker claiming that late ballots were backdated. O'Keefe tweeted the video (embedded within Twitter, as well as posted to the YouTube channel) to his one million followers. After the worker recanted his testimony in an affidavit a few days later, O'Keefe posted a follow-up tweet/video combination claiming that the whistleblower had been retaliated against by the USPS.<sup>29</sup> Both tweets (see Figure 5.10 on the next page) gained significant traction, receiving thousands of retweets and likes.

Notably, Twitter did take action on some of the misleading content propagated by Project Veritas and O'Keefe, occasionally adding labels saying the content was

## 5.6. An Integrated Look at Repeat Spreaders Across Platforms

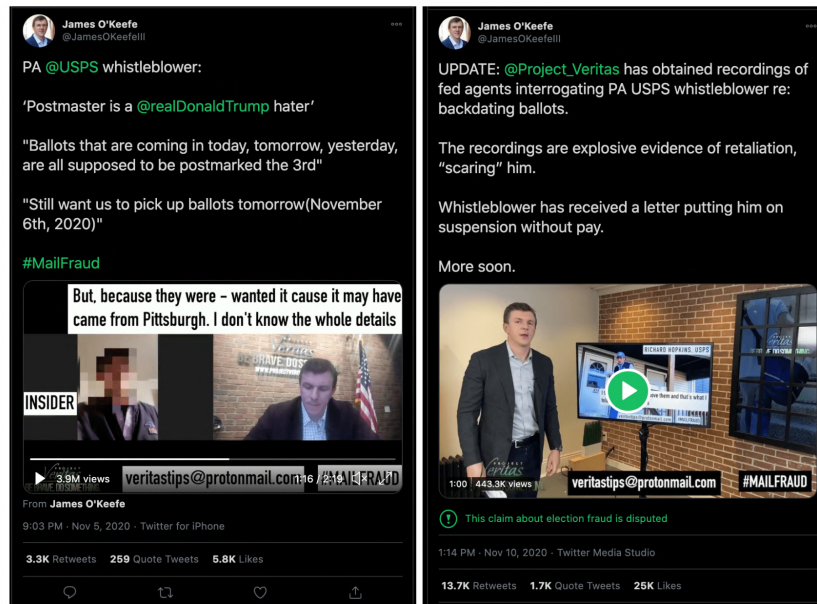


Figure 5.10: Tweets from James O'Keefe, founder of Project Veritas, claiming mail-in voting fraud in Pennsylvania.

disputed and eventually suspending the @Project\_Veritas account. Yet a lack of uniformity in policies across platforms, and the group's significant presence on multiple social media platforms, mean that most of Project Veritas's misleading content remains online in some format.

### Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai

Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai played a unique role in promoting electoral misinformation—in that it began after election day and featured almost exclusively content that misinterpreted and/or misrepresented statistics. He is also an example of overlap between producers of coronavirus and electoral misinformation. Ayyadurai's platform grew remarkably in 2020, after a video claiming Dr. Anthony Fauci was part of a Deep State conspiracy to spread coronavirus garnered more than six million views in a week.<sup>30</sup> After the 2020 election, he successfully leveraged YouTube's livestreaming feature to produce lengthy videos that proliferated multiple false narratives alongside dubious statistical "evidence." His videos were similarly livestreamed and viewed on Periscope and Facebook.

After a failed primary campaign for the US Senate in September 2020, Ayyadurai began promoting a conspiracy theory that computer tabulation systems systematically switched votes in favor of his opponent. After November 3, he extended this claim—based on fraught statistical analysis<sup>31</sup>—to asserting fraud in the US presidential election. His argument took several forms, broadly and erroneously

## 5. Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation

claiming that Trump's under-performance in areas with more straight-ticket Republican votes was evidence of a "weighted feature" of tabulation software favoring Joe Biden. When his arguments were debunked by statisticians, he altered or changed expectations or presented a new and equally fraught statistical argument.

His most popular video has gained over 1 million views since he livestreamed it on November 10. His popularity can, in part, be attributed to sharing of his content by other misinformation superspreaders, including QAnon-affiliated lawyer Sidney Powell, who not only tweeted it to her one million-plus followers but also used Ayyadurai's arguments as evidence in her so-called "Kraken" lawsuit attempting to overturn the election results in Georgia, a key swing state (see Figure 5.11).<sup>32</sup>

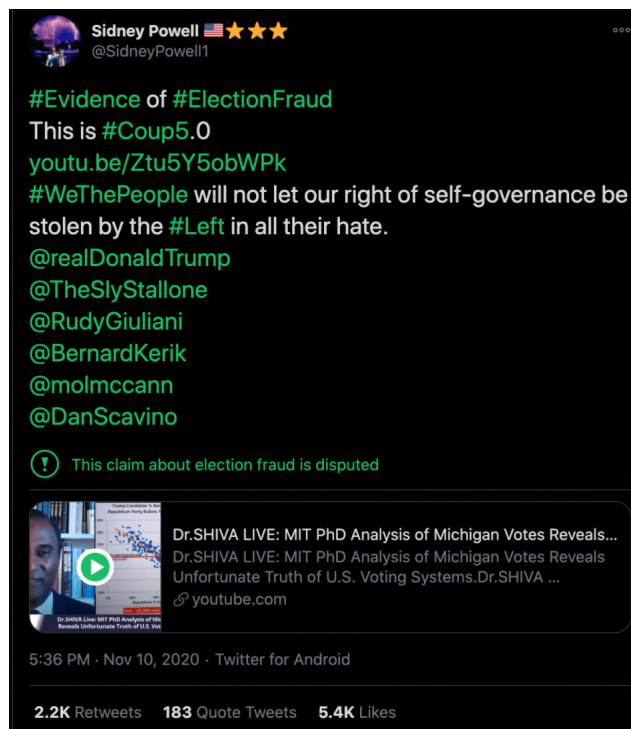


Figure 5.11: Trump legal affiliate Sydney Powell tweets a link to Ayyadurai's most popular YouTube video.

## 5.7 Summary

Our analysis suggests that the primary "influencers" in the online production and dissemination of false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election were verified, blue-check accounts belonging to partisan media outlets, social

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5.7. Summary

media influencers, and political figures. Though false narratives occasionally gained traction on the political left, almost all of the most prominent repeat spreaders—i.e., the accounts that seeded and disseminated multiple false claims and narratives—belonged to conservative and/or pro-Trump individuals and organizations. Members of the Trump campaign, including President Trump and his adult sons, played a significant role in the spread of these narratives, which converged around false and misleading claims of voter fraud and sought to undermine trust in the results of the election. These narratives persisted throughout our analysis, from August through December, and spread through and across diverse social media platforms—and through the broader information ecosystem, including cable news.





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## Notes

1. (page 182) We continued to track the spread of incidents through December 12, 2020, approximately two weeks after our real-time analysis concluded.
2. (page 182) We ran several collections in parallel, balancing terms across collections to reduce the impact of rate limits.
3. (page 183) It was possible for one incident to be related to multiple themes that the EIP defined, which is why these sum to more than 153.
4. (page 185) Nick Corasaniti, “Rudy Giuliani Sued by Dominion Voting Systems Over False Election Claims,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/us/politics/rudy-giuliani-dominion-trump.html>
5. (page 185) Saranac Hale Spencer, “Overblown Claims of ‘Bad Things’ at Philly Polls,” FactCheck.org, November 3, 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/overblown-claims-of-bad-things-at-philly-polls/>
6. (page 185) Saranac Hale Spencer, “Pennsylvania Postal Worker Waffles on Election Fraud Claim,” FactCheck.org, November 12, 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/pennsylvania-postal-worker-waffles-on-election-fraud-claim/>
7. (page 185) Jonathan Oosting, “Meet Michigan’s ‘dead’ voters. They’re quite alive despite false fraud claims,” November 10, 2020, BridgeMichigan, <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/meet-michigans-dead-voters-theyre-quite-alive-despite-false-fraud-claims>
8. (page 185) Samantha Putterman, “Video makes it look like left-leaning groups plotted post-election coup. That’s not the whole story,” PolitiFact, November 5, 2020, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/nov/05/video-makes-it-look-left-leaning-groups-plotted-po/>

## 5. Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation

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9. (page 185) Bethania Palma, “Viral Video Spreads Unfounded Claims about Rep. Ilhan Omar and Voter Fraud,” Snopes, updated October 19, 2020, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2020/09/29/project-veritas-ilhan-omar/>

10. (page 184) The network was generated from our larger Twitter data collection—the 859 million tweets we collected about the election and voting. This creates a stable network structure onto which we later mapped specific incidents.

11. (page 184) We used the Louvain method for identifying communities in the network graph; see Wikipedia, s.v. “Louvain method,” last modified February 9, 2021, 12:45 pm, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louvain\\_method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louvain_method)

12. (page 186) We used a slightly abbreviated time window for this part of the analysis (than for calculating spread of the incidents), but due to the high thresholds for inclusion of nodes and edges, the structure is fairly stable and it is unlikely that influential nodes would shift from one community to another if more data was included.

13. (page 186) Ian Kennedy, et al., “Emerging Narratives Around ‘Mail Dumping’ and Election Integrity,” Election Integrity Partnership, September 29, 2020, <https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/mail-dumping>

14. (page 187) As we note in the section on Participatory Mis- and Disinformation in Chapter 4, many of the rank-and-file accounts on the political right viewed their participation in these false and misleading narratives as helping to expose wrongdoing, not as spreading misinformation.

15. (page 187) Election Integrity Partnership Team, “Repeat Offenders: Voting Misinformation on Twitter in the 2020 United States Election,” Election Integrity Partnership, October 29, 2020, <https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/repeat-offenders>

16. (page 188) “Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump,” Twitter blog, January 8, 2021, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html); AJ Dellinger, “Twitter suspends ‘Gateway Pundit’ Jim Hoft,” *Forbes*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajdellinger/2021/02/06/twitter-suspends-gateway-pundit-jim-hoft/>; @cjtruth, Twitter profile, <https://twitter.com/cjtruth>; Chris Mills Rodrigo, “Twitter permanently suspends Michael Flynn, Sidney Powell and others,” *The Hill*, January 8, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/533424-twitter-permanently-suspends-michael-flynn-sidney-powell-and-others>

17. (page 190) Holmes Lybrand and Tara Subramaniam, “Fact check: Evidence undermines Trump campaign’s claims of dead people voting in Georgia,” CNN,

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updated November 13, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/12/politics/trump-campaign-georgia-dead-voters-fact-check/index.html>

18. (page 191) One limitation of this approach is that it provides a view of YouTube activity filtered by content shared on Twitter (with at least one retweet). Videos that were not cross-posted to Twitter are not included.

19. (page 192) Sheera Frenkel, “The Rise and Fall of the ‘Stop the Steal’ Facebook Group,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/technology/stop-the-steal-facebook-group.html>

20. (page 194) Davey Alba, “Riled Up: Misinformation Stokes Calls for Violence on Election Day,” *New York Times*, updated January 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/technology/viral-misinformation-violence-election.html>

21. (page 194) Miami Police Department (@MiamiPD), “We are aware of the photograph being circulated of a Miami Police officer wearing a political mask in uniform. This behavior is unacceptable, a violation of departmental policy, and is being addressed immediately,” Twitter, October 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/MiamiPD/status/1318579324723789825>

22. (page 194) Rachel Moran, et al., “Left-Leaning Influencers, ‘Mainstream’ Media Play Big Role in Amplifying ‘Army for Trump’ Fears,” Election Integrity Partnership, October 12, 2020, <https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/army-of-trump>

23. (page 195) Twitter, “Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump.”

24. (page 196) Isabella Garcia-Camargo, et al., “Project Veritas #BallotHarvesting Amplification,” Election Integrity Partnership, September 29, 2020, <https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/project-veritas-ballotharvesting>

25. (page 196) Dellinger, “Twitter suspends ‘Gateway Pundit’ Jim Hoft.”

26. (page 200) Jeremy Barr, “Newsmax issues sweeping ‘clarification’ debunking its own coverage of election misinformation,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2020/12/21/newsmax-clarification-smartmatic/>

27. (page 201) Liban Osman, interview by Tom Lyden, Fox 9 Minneapolis-St. Paul, on “Subject of Project Veritas voter fraud story says he was offered bribe,” YouTube, October 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzFGVEEB0Yw>

28. (page 201) Project Veritas (@Project\_Veritas), “Twitter is censoring this video hard,” Twitter, November 12, 2020, 2:11 pm, [https://twitter.com/project\\_veritas/status/1327011272605528064](https://twitter.com/project_veritas/status/1327011272605528064); “Civic integrity policy,” Twitter Help, January 2021, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/election-integrity-policy>

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29. (page 202) Shawn Boburg and Jacob Bogage, “Postal worker recanted allegations of ballot tampering, officials say,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/postal-worker-fabricated-ballot-pennsylvania/2020/11/10/99269a7c-2364-11eb-8599-406466ad1b8e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/postal-worker-fabricated-ballot-pennsylvania/2020/11/10/99269a7c-2364-11eb-8599-406466ad1b8e_story.html)

30. (page 203) Ryan Broderick, “A YouTube Video Accusing Dr. Anthony Fauci of Being Part of the Deep State Has Been Viewed Over 6 Million Times in a Week,” *BuzzFeed News*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/youtube-anthony-fauci-deep-state-coronavirus>

31. (page 203) Naim Kabir, “Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai and the Danger of Data Charlatans,” *Medium*, <https://kabir-naim.medium.com/dr-shiva-ayyadurai-the-danger-of-data-charlatans-4f675ffe793c>

32. (page 204) Aaron Keller, “Sidney Powell’s ‘Kraken’ Lawsuit Argues Improbability of ‘High Republican, Low Trump’ Voting Patterns,” *Law & Crime*, November 30, 2020, <https://lawandcrime.com/2020-election/sidney-powells-kraken-lawsuit-argues-improbability-of-high-republican-low-trump-voting-patterns/>

Chapter **6**

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**Policy****6.1 Introduction**

Platform policies establish the rules of participation in social media communities. Recognizing the heightened rhetoric and the use of mis- and disinformation during the 2020 election, all of the major platforms made significant changes to election integrity policies, both as the campaigns kicked off and through the weeks after Election Day—policies that attempted to slow the spread of specific narratives and tactics that could potentially mislead or deceive the public, though the efforts were not always successful.

Throughout the election period, a team of EIP analysts evaluated platform policies within three contexts:

- **Actors' Content and Behavior:** The content and behavior that platforms identify fall in or out of behavior that violates their policies.
- **Platform Actions:** What moderation strategies are proportionate to deal with the actors' content and behaviors.
- **Overall Communication of Platform Policies:** How policies are communicated to the public clearly and transparently.

This chapter begins by briefly reviewing and comparing platform policy iterations before and during the 2020 election. We then describe the primary platform interventions, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they were applied to the repeat spreaders in our dataset. From there we discuss misinformation problems that have no clear-cut policy solutions, and conclude with a forward-looking assessment of areas for policy improvement.

## 6. Policy

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### 6.2 Social Media Platform Policy Evolution

Major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and TikTok introduced changes to their community standards in the months leading up to the election and in the aftermath. The timeline below shows the four phases that correspond with larger policy trends across multiple platforms:<sup>1</sup>

- **Phase 0: April 2019–August 2020.** Some platforms introduced or updated their policies on election misinformation. However, the majority of platforms still had sparse, non-specific, or non-existent policies around election-related content.
- **Phase 1: September 2020.** A number of platforms announced the first updates to election-specific policies: making large additions; adding more clarity and specificity; or stating clearly that they will label or remove content that delegitimizes the integrity of the election.
- **Phase 2: Early October 2020.** A month before the election, platforms specified the media organizations they would rely on for determining when races are declared and emphasized removing content that intimidates voters or incites violence. However, they did not distinguish between general and specific calls to action.
- **Phase 3: Late October 2020.** In the days leading up to the election, platforms previewed their Election Day plans. This included providing concrete examples of what labels on content discussing election results will look like.
- **Phase 4: Early November 2020 (post-election).** Platforms released information about the content and behavior they saw and their moderation efforts on and after Election Day; some policies were updated to address post-election claims of election fraud.

Early in the EIP's research, we identified specific categories of potential election misinformation (see Chapter 1) and ranked policy comprehensiveness in each category.<sup>2</sup> Table 6.1 on page 214 and 6.2 on page 215 illustrate the evolution of platforms' policies: the first shows coverage in August 2020; the second shows where the policies stood as of October 28, 2020, right before the election. (Our methodology for platform evaluations—which focused on formal or publicly stated policies for addressing election misinformation—can be found in Appendix F on page 265.)

There are two key findings from this analysis. First, platforms that already had election-related policies strengthened them, while platforms that went into the



## 6.2. Social Media Platform Policy Evolution

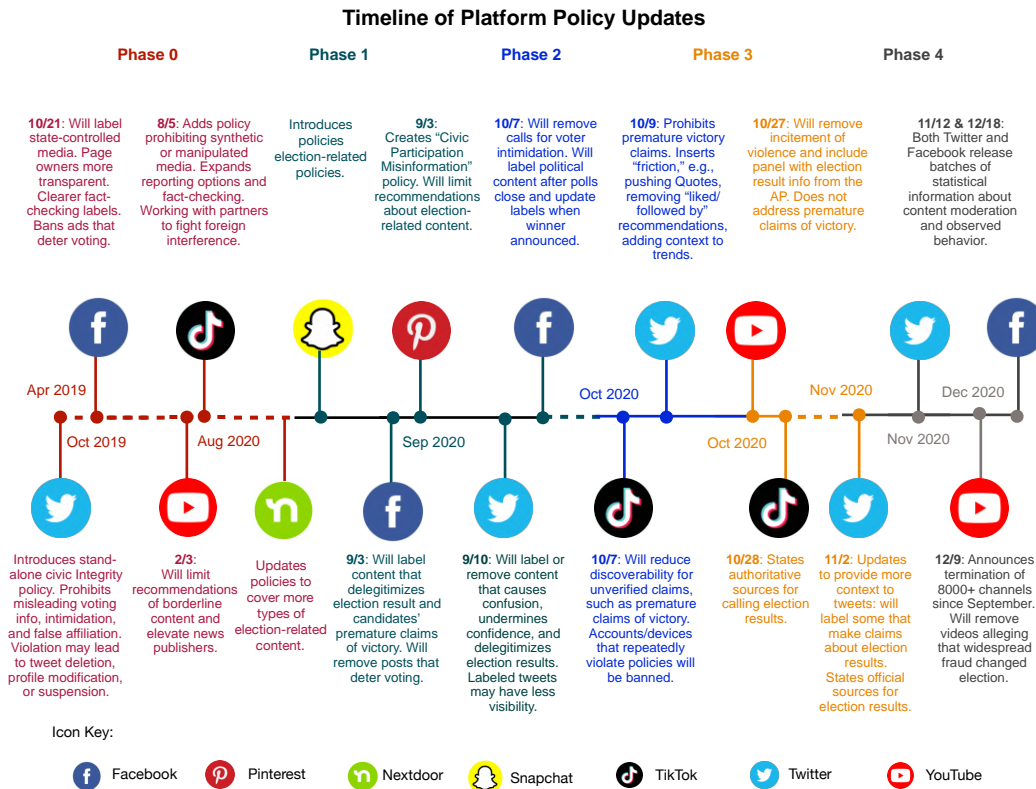


Figure 6.1: A timeline of the four phases of election policy introduced by the platforms in the lead-up to and after the 2020 election.

election without any policies remained without them through the election, with the exception of Snapchat.<sup>3</sup>

Second, many platform policy updates related to the 2020 election cycle focused far more on explicit topical content restrictions than on user behavior. After the discovery of Russian interference in the 2016 election, platforms focused on behavior, such as coordinated inauthentic behavior, rather than content.<sup>4</sup> Even in 2020, Facebook's first election policy announcement focused on its efforts to combat this behavior and "fight foreign interference."<sup>5</sup> Yet much of the misinformation in the 2020 election was pushed by authentic, domestic actors, and platforms shifted their focus to address downstream harms related to the content itself. As a result, most subsequent updates introduced policies related to specific content categories, such as claims of premature victory or posts that promote violence at the polls. The iterative nature of platform policies during the election season also indicates that, despite having seen certain narratives in previous elections that were predicted to appear again in 2020, many platforms did not proactively adapt policies to combat these narratives.

## 6. Policy

	Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Facebook	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Twitter	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
YouTube	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Pinterest	None	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Nextdoor	Comprehensive	None	Non-Comprehensive	None
TikTok	Non-Comprehensive	None	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Snapchat	*No election-related policies			
Parler	*No election-related policies			
Gab	*No election-related policies			
Discord	*No election-related policies			
WhatsApp	*No election-related policies			
Telegram	*No election-related policies			
Reddit	*No election-related policies			
Twitch	*No election-related policies			

Table 6.1: The EIP's evaluation of platform policies as they stood in August 2020. A rating of "No election-related policies" means the platform has no explicit policy or stance on the issue; although the platform may have existing policies that address misleading content, we were unable to evaluate how they might apply in an election-related context. We grouped the 15th platform, Instagram, with Facebook, however it is not entirely clear to our team if every election-related policy update made by Facebook also applied to Instagram.

### 6.3 Platform Interventions: Policy Approaches and Application Outcomes

In addition to tracking the evolution of content-based policy changes, the EIP examined the benefits and drawbacks of the tactics that platforms used to enforce their new policies: remove, reduce, and inform. These interventions encompass a spectrum of actions, from removing content and suspending users, to creating friction, to contextualizing with content labels.

Ultimately, we find that platform intervention and users' responses are part of a feedback loop: platforms' observations of actions reveal the need for policies, and policies impact subsequent actions. From July to November, we watched policy shape users' tactics, and users' tactics impact policy. While this reciprocity can make it difficult to stop the spread of misinformation, it can also force platforms to fortify or adapt their policies.

### 6.3. Platform Interventions: Policy Approaches and Application Outcomes

	Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Facebook	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Twitter	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Comprehensive
YouTube	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Pinterest	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Nextdoor	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
TikTok	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Snapchat	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive	Non-Comprehensive
Parler	*No election-related policies			
Gab	*No election-related policies			
Discord	*No election-related policies			
WhatsApp	*No election-related policies			
Telegram	*No election-related policies			
Reddit	*No election-related policies			
Twitch	*No election-related policies			

Table 6.2: After multiple iterations of policy updates, the EIP's final evaluation of platform policies as of October 28, 2020. Listings in red indicate a change in policy from the start of our monitoring period. We grouped the 15th platform, Instagram, with Facebook, however it is not entirely clear to our team if every election-related policy update made by Facebook also applied to Instagram.

### Platform Moderation Approach: Remove

The most punitive moderation tools at a platform's disposal are content removal and account suspensions. "Remove" can be applied to actors for several reasons: accounts can be suspended for inauthentic identities, coordinated inauthentic behavior, or repeatedly violating the community guidelines—such as the repeat spreaders discussed in Chapter 5.

The intention behind this type of moderation is to prune false or misleading information at its source. It is often used to address content that can have the greatest real-world harm, and platforms were committed to removing calls for interference in the election process that may lead to violence. In our dataset of tickets, incitement to violence had the highest rate of content or account removal.

Despite what appeared to be clear policy to penalize or remove repeat spreaders and high-profile disinformation actors, platforms appeared to shy away from using this particular intervention. In some cases, this was a result of a variety of "newsworthiness" exceptions, which allowed some high-profile repeat spreaders, including politicians, to evade bans.<sup>6</sup> Yet many of the repeat spreaders we saw were not politicians.

## 6. Policy

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### **Platform Moderation Approach: Reduce**

The second moderation intervention is to “reduce” the distribution of policy-violating content so that fewer users see it—to insert “friction.” This type of intervention may include methods such as downranking content so that it appears lower in a user’s feed or preventing sharing capabilities to reduce the spread of certain content.

Several platforms employed friction leading up to the election. Twitter introduced a series of changes, including turning off the ability to reply, retweet, or like a tweet that violated the policy.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, TikTok redirected search results and hashtags, such as #RiggedElection and #SharpieGate, that violated its community guidelines, preventing users from finding others who use the terms.<sup>8</sup> Facebook supplied additional context to content-sharing features by warning people when they share old content links, a common pattern seen in misinformation. This Facebook product feature demonstrates how friction can also go hand in hand with informing users, discussed more below.<sup>9</sup>

Policies introducing friction can be particularly helpful around networked framing, where platforms face not one piece of content but rather the conglomeration of often countless instances of misinformation or hard-to-verify information. If looked at like a narrative puzzle, individual pieces are less consequential than the whole image—platforms must have the insight to see the puzzle before it is formed. By expanding friction policies to address narratives rather than individual pieces of content, platforms stand a better chance at reducing the negative impact of networked framing.

Although the EIP does not have insight into how well these friction-inducing policies reduced the spread of misinformation, Twitter stated that from October 27, 2020, to November 11, 2020, they saw an estimated 29% decrease in quote tweets of labeled tweets, perhaps due in part to a prompt that warned people prior to sharing.<sup>10</sup>

### **Platform Moderation Approach: Inform**

Content labels were the most commonly used policy intervention by Facebook during the 2020 election and were used by Twitter on approximately 300,000 pieces of content.<sup>11</sup> Though labels permit policy-violating content to stay on a platform, they may reduce distribution and alter how users interact with content.

The EIP observed four distinct issues related to labeling practices during the 2020 election. First, some platforms struggled to apply labels uniformly: content identical in substance was labeled in some instances but not others. Labels signal that something may be false or misleading. If some content is unlabeled

### 6.3. Platform Interventions: Policy Approaches and Application Outcomes

beled, it may give the impression that it might be true—an “implied truth effect”—unintentionally giving credence to misleading content.<sup>12</sup>

Lack of uniform labeling leads to another challenge: mislabeling. Some platforms use automated systems—AI—to detect and label content. However, AI sometimes fails to distinguish between content that violates policies and content that does not. For example, Facebook used AI to automatically label most election-related content with a generic label: “Visit the Voting Information Center for voting resources and official election updates.” While the AI did label some content as false, the generic auto-label was applied more frequently. In fact, content that would more appropriately be labeled as “false” was instead tagged with the “Voting Information Center” label. The AI’s inability to distinguish false or misleading content from general election-related commentary may have diminished the value of Facebook’s labeling policy entirely. On balance, AI-driven labeling is another flaw in platforms’ policy approach to identifying misinformation.<sup>13</sup>

Second, inconsistent label language and placement impedes platforms’ attempts to reduce the spread of misinformation. Varied language can inspire confusion and speculation about platforms’ intent, while problematic placement and design may obscure labels from view.

Inconsistent label language can be particularly problematic, especially against the backdrop of an ongoing, hyperpartisan battle over content moderation. For example, in May 2019, Twitter marked a handful of President Trump’s tweets with a relatively neutral label: “Get the facts about mail-in ballots.” But in October, when President Trump tweeted similar content, Twitter changed the labels: in contrast to the previous passive language, Twitter applied a label that read, “Learn how voting by mail is safe and secure,” complete with an embedded link to voting resources.<sup>14</sup>

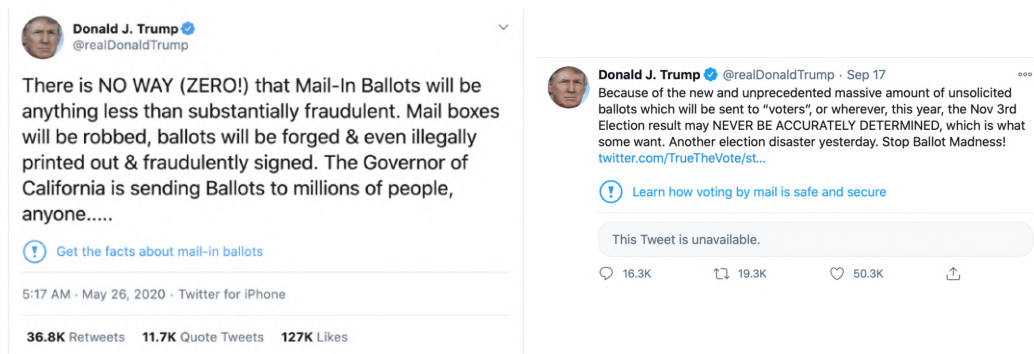


Figure 6.2: President Trump’s tweets, both violative of Twitter’s civic integrity policy, labeled with different language.

However, the shift occurred without explanation from Twitter, and repeat

## 6. Policy

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spreaders speculated about Twitter's purported political agenda in its wake. While changes in label language are appropriate responses to misinformation, lack of context and documentation of these changes, or confusing rollouts, may trigger distrust, leading users and media outlets to speculate about a platform's motives rather than consider the veracity of the content.<sup>15</sup> Notably, subsequent updates to Twitter's label language, such as those responding to official election results, came with official statements that previewed what these labels would look like.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, label location is a notable design weakness: because location is not mandated by policy, aesthetics seems to be the primary concern. Thus, some platforms put labels below the flagged content instead of directly above it. Because users have varied hardware and personalized software (e.g., text size, speech-to-text), labels placed on the bottom may appear off-screen—or content could be screen-captured without its bottom label and shared as if it had not received a label at all. Further, users may click away from the post before even seeing a label at the bottom. Although we cannot say with certainty whether labels are effective measures of deterring users' belief in misinformation, placing labels at the bottom of misleading posts risks the foreclosure of any possibility of deterrence.

Third, the EIP additionally observed that when platforms were slow to label, misinformation spread quickly, achieving wide distribution before a platform took action. Difficulty with fact-checking and verification, among other issues, often gave repeat spreaders with large followings the space to quickly circulate false narratives as platforms deliberated the appropriate response. For example, Twitter permitted a number of Trump's misinformation-riddled tweets to go unlabeled for several hours after they appeared on his timeline. Between the time of posting and the label's application, Trump's tweets were retweeted, quote tweeted, and shared tens of thousands of times.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the EIP observed inconsistency of label implementation between platforms, even when they shared similar content-labeling policies. This is one component of the cross-platform dynamic identified in previous chapters. Ultimately, discrepancy in labeling across platforms creates an opportunity for misinformation to thrive. People are users on multiple platforms, and are thus forced to determine what the presence or absence of a label on one platform versus another means about the truth of election-related content.

### **Platform Interventions vs. Repeat Spreaders and Influencers**

As Chapter 4 and 5 lay out, the structure of mis- and disinformation includes both top-down prominent accounts as well as bottom-up participation. In the 2020 election, repeat spreaders played a key role in both elevating crowd-sourced



### 6.3. Platform Interventions: Policy Approaches and Application Outcomes

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stories and providing a frame to interpret them. This section highlights how platform policies set the rules for engagement, and how gaps in policies can be exploited by repeat spreaders.

Repeat spreaders sometimes face consequences for their violations, such as content labels or removal, after platforms take the user's history and the severity of infringement into account. However, in the dataset of repeat spreaders introduced in Chapter 5 we saw that very few Twitter accounts were actually removed—only four including President Trump's as of February 2021—and that many of them are still active on other platforms. Additionally, the proliferation of misleading and false narratives suggests that the policy interventions outlined above were not successful.

Central to this issue is that repeat spreader policies are not clear in two key ways. First, the majority of platforms do not publicly communicate the number of offenses a user must commit before they will take action on the user's entire account (e.g., suspension), not just on their content (e.g., labeling). While platforms like Facebook have an internal strike system for offenses, at the time of the election YouTube was the only platform that, in the form of its three-strike rule, publicly placed clear limits.<sup>18</sup> The lack of transparency means that we also do not know the type of action to expect against an account after a certain number of violations. We do not know, for example, when a suspension will be temporary versus permanent.

Second, it is also unclear how public interest exemptions may play into repeat spreader policies. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have policies that exempt certain content from elected and government officials from being removed;<sup>19</sup> however, we do not know if or when a government official account would be suspended if it repeatedly violates platform policy. For example, Twitter labeled half of newly elected Representative Marjorie Taylor Green's tweets after the polls closed on Election Day, without moving to suspend her (see Figure 6.3 on the following page).<sup>20</sup>

After the insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6, one of the most prominent repeat spreaders, President Trump, was suspended from a number of platforms; Twitter permanently suspended his account on January 8.<sup>21</sup> Four days later, Twitter introduced a detailed strike system specifically for the civic integrity policy.<sup>22</sup> It is unclear if Twitter has applied this new policy since its creation, or if they will expand its strike system to other policy areas, such as COVID-19 misinformation. However, this new policy reflects a robust adaptation for responding to repeat spreaders.

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Figure 6.3: A sample of tweets by Representative Marjorie Taylor Green on November 4, 2020. (Note: these are selected tweets, not an image of her timeline. Some of her tweets in this short time period were not labeled.)

### 6.4 Mis- and Disinformation Problems Without Clear Policy Solutions

Even with these policies in place, with full and consistent implementation, other obstacles to preventing and containing the spread of mis- and disinformation exist. As platforms, researchers, and official policymakers work to protect the integrity of our elections, it is important to recognize those obstacles for which, at this moment, there may be no clear policy solution. These include cross-platform complexities, the use of non-falsifiable content, backlash against platform interventions (“techlash”), and organized outrage.

#### 6.4. Mis- and Disinformation Problems Without Clear Policy Solutions

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### **Cross-Platform Complexities**

Much of what we have discussed up to this point relates to policy challenges faced by each individual platform. However, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the platforms, combined, form an information ecosystem through which content moves; therefore, the cross-platform spread of misinformation cannot be solved through intervention by one platform alone. Prior to the 2020 election, US government agencies and several platforms met periodically to communicate the standards and observations of internal trust and safety teams, which resulted in a joint statement noting the collaborative work.<sup>23</sup> However, while the group committed to discuss active threats throughout and following the election, it remained the responsibility of each company to enforce measures to mitigate misinformation. Ultimately, platforms do not transparently outline nor allow independent assessment of how they engage in sector-specific, cross-platform information sharing.

Important legal ramifications such as user privacy and antitrust laws make this collaborative environment difficult. Another challenge is that some platforms, such as Parler and Gab, do not have content moderation policies or even intentions to moderate. Lastly, as legal scholar Evelyn Douek outlines in her work “The Rise of Content Cartels,” there are drawbacks to private corporations setting the rules of permissible speech across platforms, regardless of how effective they may be.<sup>24</sup>

### **Use of Non-Falsifiable Content**

The election information ecosystem was replete with non-falsifiable claims—such as those from anonymous whistleblowers or a “friend of a friend.” These claims can be the most difficult to fact-check, and the current policies in place are insufficient to fully address hard-to-verify content.

Platforms use fact-checking partners to surface and verify false statements, but unfalsifiable information can easily fall through the cracks. Facebook’s fact-checking program, for example, identifies and addresses “particularly clear hoaxes that have no basis in fact”—a relatively strict threshold of falsifiability—and “is not meant to interfere with individual expression” on the platform.<sup>25</sup> The problem lies, however, at the intersection of falsehood and personal experience, forcing platforms to either over moderate at the risk of removing personal content that is unfalsifiable, or under moderate and allow this potentially misleading material to proliferate. Some platforms such as TikTok are developing mechanisms to limit the distribution of claims that can’t be verified or when fact-checking is rendered inconclusive.<sup>26</sup> These mechanisms are important, but they need to be enforced quickly and at scale. Actors will continue to frame misinformation as personal and unfalsifiable experiences, some for political

## 6. Policy

gain, as long as the unverified-content gray area exists in platform policies and actions.

### Techlash Against Policy Interventions

As fact-checking becomes increasingly important to the information ecosystem, platform interventions have often received a “techlash,” and accusations of censorship, mostly from the conservative right.<sup>27</sup> For example, after a slew of Marjorie Taylor Greene’s posts were labeled as disputed and possibly misleading, as described above, Greene posted a claim that Twitter had “censored” her; she included a screenshot of the “censored” tweets.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, platform fact-checking labels were weaponized to make the case that platforms allegedly have political agendas, and thus the fact-checks should be considered untrustworthy and disregarded. EIP analysts observed that when some accounts were removed, the account’s followers expressed that the mere fact of its removal was proof of a greater conspiracy to “cover up the truth.” This appeared to contribute to meta-misinformation about the intentions of the platforms. Continued lack of transparency and perceived inconsistencies behind account takedowns may further entangle platforms with the narratives they hoped to nix.



Figure 6.4: This tweet from Congressman Kevin McCarthy demonstrates the backlash to platform action against one of President Trump’s tweets (first reported in the *Washington Post* on June 23, 2020)<sup>29</sup>

In some respects, these continued claims of platform censorship have fuelled the movement of influencers to smaller, obscure, or specialized platforms like Parler, where there is less moderation and far fewer fact-checks.

## 6.5. Primary Areas for Policy Improvement

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### Organized Outrage

Social media plays a critical role in facilitating legitimate protest. However, features such as Groups, event pages, and hashtags can be used to spread misinformation and stoke outrage to galvanize offline action. In the 2020 election, protesters, motivated by election misinformation and conspiracy theories, swarmed polling locations and chanted hashtags they read online, such as #Sharpiegate and #StoptheSteal.

This organized outrage raises the question of how platforms can proactively identify which hashtags or speech are likely to result in organizing offline action with the potential for violence. While applying a label can create friction before content gains enough attention to incite offline action, platforms may struggle to move beyond the reactive and to have the political and cultural expertise to quickly and effectively contextualize hashtags, Groups, and event pages.

As the insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6 demonstrates, the organizing leading up to the violent acts took place on multiple platforms. Facebook provided a unifying feature in the form of Groups, which, like the other large platforms, contributed to giving the outrage a shape and form even when the Group was taken down. This event underscores the important need for platforms to not only assess the calculus of what is actionable content but also ensure that their policies are implemented.

## 6.5 Primary Areas for Policy Improvement

In addition to how policies are implemented, platforms' methods of communication and the transparency of their data are incredibly important to election-related policies. This section discusses how issues related to policy clarity and transparency at times undermined platforms' goal of reducing the spread of mis- and disinformation.

### Clarity

It is not enough simply to have a policy and a moderation regime in place; the community governed by the rules must understand both in order for them to be most effective. Despite improvements to policy comprehensiveness and a shift toward some proactive policy implementation ahead of the election, platforms struggled with straightforward policy language and centralizing all policy updates. With the exception of a few platforms, such as Twitter and Pinterest, platforms lacked a centralized location for all of their election-related policies. Instead, policies were spread across blog posts, excluded from formal community standards entirely, or disseminated in different sections of platforms' terms of service. Platforms also failed to announce policy updates uniformly.

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Some updates were announced through blog posts, some through the personal social media accounts of top executives, and some not at all.<sup>30</sup>

The absence of a central and public mechanism to announce and host policy changes makes it difficult to track changes over time. Without clear documentation, policy changes run the risk of confusing users as to what is and is not permissible election-related speech.

The presence of vague and undefined terms in policy language also poses a clarity problem. For example, in October 2020, TikTok updated its policy to prohibit any “attempts to intimidate voters or suppress voting.”<sup>31</sup> Yet outside of general incitements to violence, TikTok did not sufficiently define what voter intimidation or voter suppression looks like on its platform. However, we recognize an encouraging trend: platforms are making more adjustments to improve clarity (at times successful, other times less so) from when they first began updating their policies. Ultimately, a focus on reducing generalized language and streamlining policy availability is a step in the right direction.

### Transparency

Although the EIP could trace content, identify policy shifts, and engage with stakeholders, we were left trying to answer one particularly important question: are the intervention methods effective? And how do platforms measure that?

While a number of internet platforms adopted election-related content labeling policies, those labels’ effectiveness in combating false narratives is difficult for external researchers to assess. As of December 2020,<sup>32</sup> most major platforms had not released data about the volume and consistency of labeled content. Without information about where labels appeared, who interacted with those labels, and what those interactions could imply, researchers are left to formulate a best guess about the effectiveness of platforms’ most substantial intervention effort. One study asserts that the universality of label application is necessary to avoid the “implied truth effect”; however, it is impossible to replicate in the wake of the 2020 election, and restricted access to platform data impedes any further study. Over the past two years, many platforms have continued to limit access to and the functionality of their public application interfaces (APIs),<sup>33</sup> and while their large-scale instructed datasets, or adaptive algorithms, can provide important insights into the online information ecosystem, these datasets are often compiled behind closed doors. This raises concerns about the independence, exhaustiveness, and validity of research and monitoring activities that rely solely on this data.

Increasing transparency in moderation practices will increase public auditability and the subsequent perceived legitimacy of platform decisions. As the presence of mis- and disinformation online is not likely to decrease in the coming years,



## 6.6. Platform Policy Moving Forward

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transparency is a prerequisite for any platform seeking to effectively intervene in its influence.

### 6.6 Platform Policy Moving Forward

Policy shapes the propagation of information by impacting what content is permitted, and to what extent it receives widespread distribution. As we have discussed, the major social platforms recognized the risks of election misinformation and adjusted their policies in several key ways to try to prevent misleading narratives from taking hold, or violence from occurring. They moderated by removing misleading or false content, reducing its distribution, and informing and contextualizing content for users. Despite these efforts, accounts with large and loyal audiences repeatedly took advantage of gaps in platform policy: repeat spreaders packaged false claims of voter fraud into hard-to-verify narratives that escaped timely fact-checks, and President Donald Trump himself—covered under a newsworthiness exemption—was a key player in the incitement that ultimately led to violence at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>34</sup> The consequences for repeatedly violating platform policy did not appear to deter these actors, in part because the consequences themselves were inconsistently applied.

In a remarkable turn of events, Twitter removed the sitting President of the United States from its platform on January 8. After the insurrection at the Capitol, platforms suspended President Trump’s account, and thousands of others, for “risk of future incitement of violence.”<sup>35</sup> This action has sparked a public conversation about policy and power, including a broader discussion of how to weigh the need to remove accounts spreading misinformation—including, at times, those of democratically elected politicians—against stifling legitimate discourse and free expression.

Ultimately, it is impossible to separate the events at the Capitol on January 6 from the narratives around voter fraud and a rigged election that began much earlier. As online speech turned into offline action, platform policy was the one line of defense, outside of the partisan leadership fuelling the misinformation, that could deter this progression. Given the significant decision to suspend a sitting (albeit outgoing) president’s accounts on Instagram and Facebook indefinitely, Facebook has referred its action to the Oversight Board.<sup>36</sup> The decision will most likely not only shape future platform policy decisions concerning politicians in the US but also set a precedent for how to approach the accounts of other global leaders.

There isn’t a simple panacea for these policy weaknesses. Content moderation policies will continue to evolve, as they have after the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol. The next election will have its own unique set of misinformation narratives, yet many of the tactics, dynamics, and basic structures of these narra-

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tives will likely remain the same. Therefore, platforms must set pre-established, clear, and transparent rules rather than waiting to react to events as they unfold. In the next chapter we discuss specific recommendations for policymakers in light of the narrative, tactical, and policy findings in this report.

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## Notes

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## 6.6. Platform Policy Moving Forward

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## Chapter 7

# Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

## 7.1 Introduction

The Election Integrity Partnership was born out of a collective challenge. The responsibility of mitigating election-related mis- and disinformation is shared, and thus the observations and recommendations in this chapter span government, media, social media platforms, and civil society, and the organizing functions between each.

There isn't any single catch-all policy that will rid elections—much less democracy—of false or misleading information. However, institutions and individuals responsible for election processes, or responsible for portions of the information ecosystem, can each adopt policies (some modest, some transformative), to build more resilience to misinformation.

Doing nothing is not an option. A government by and for the people depends on the people coming together around trustworthy information in order to make informed decisions—including around electing leaders. There is no doubt of the causal impact mis- and disinformation about the 2020 US elections played in the violent insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Not pursuing structural policy change will accelerate our country's slide toward extremism, erode our shared national and inclusive identity, and propel yet more individuals toward radicalization via mis- and disinformation. The problem is larger than elections: it spans politics, self-governance, and critical policy areas, including public health.

In many ways, the Election Integrity Partnership was inspired by past recommendations for addressing election-related vulnerabilities. For example, the

## 7. Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

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Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's second of a five-volume report on foreign-based disinformation, published in 2019, included a bipartisan recommendation:

The Committee recommends that social media companies work to facilitate greater information sharing between the public and private sector, and among the social companies themselves about malicious activity and platform vulnerabilities that are exploited to spread disinformation. **Formalized mechanisms for collaboration that facilitate content sharing among the social media platforms in order to defend against foreign disinformation, as occurred with violent extremist content online, should be fostered.** As researchers have concluded: "Many disinformation campaigns and cyber threats do not just manipulate one platform; the information moves across various platforms or a cyber-attack threatens multiple companies' network security and data integrity. There must be greater cooperation within the tech sector and between the tech sector and other stakeholders to address these issues."<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis added.)

The Election Integrity Partnership was designed to do just that: formalize collaboration among organizations to protect against misinformation. The recommendations in this chapter are tailored to the Election Integrity Partnership's scope, specifically, identifying and mitigating misinformation related to US elections. However, many of them have broader potential in building toward a normative approach for elections, social media, and information access in free and open societies.

## 7.2 Government

While the responsibility for accurate information is spread across society, the responsibility for protecting elections is singularly that of the government. This set of broad recommendations spans a complex system of state and local election systems feeding into the federal system and focuses on dual responsibilities of facilitating and providing information about elections.

### The Executive Branch

- Strengthen interagency coordination by elevating election security as a national security priority and reaffirming the critical infrastructure designation for election systems, allowing the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to further prioritize resources and support to state and local officials.

## 7.2. Government

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- Solidify clear interagency leadership roles and responsibilities. CISA should remain the lead on domestic vulnerabilities and coordination with state and local election officials; the Office of the Director of National Intelligence should coordinate intelligence assessments and lead the Intelligence Community on foreign-based threats; the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation should maintain investigation and law enforcement leadership for domestic and international threats. The Election Assistance Commission should remain in an amplifying role, pushing best practices and critical information out broadly to the election community.
- Create standards and mechanisms for consistent disclosures of mis- and disinformation from foreign and domestic sources, including via CISA's Rumor Control and joint interagency statements related to foreign-based threats.<sup>2</sup>
- Maintain a threat assessment of the current election mis- and disinformation state of play, informed by collaboration with social media platforms. Update this assessment during federal election cycles and release it to election officials, social media platforms, civil society, and members of the media.

## Congress

- Election security should be prioritized over politics. Make best efforts to separate the substantive and critical issue of election security from the electoral politics that every member of Congress is engaged in during each election. For example, Congress should authorize all non-emergency election-related bills one year prior to the next regular election.
- Pass existing bipartisan proposals with increased appropriations marked for federal and state election security, specifically resources for federal agencies directly engaged in election security and more broadly toward providing coordinated election security assistance and support to state and local officials (see next section).
- Codify the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's bipartisan recommendations on depolarization and public official conduct, as noted in Volumes 3 and 5 of the Committee's exhaustive report on foreign influence in the 2016 election.<sup>3</sup>
- Strengthen digital expertise at federal regulators with election-related jurisdictions, including the Federal Elections Commission and Federal Communications Commission, to improve enforcement of existing regulations.

## 7. Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

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### State and Local Officials

Prepare a tiered communications plan that includes:

- A start-to-finish story for each voter's ballot. This should include information about how to register to vote; ensuring one's registration is up to date; where, when, and how to vote; and how votes will be counted and reported, including the timing of that process.
- Processes for reporting misinformation to social media platforms and government partners.
- Establish trusted channels of communication with voters. This should include a .gov website and use of both traditional media and social media. This effort should include:
  - A single authoritative source (webpage or social media account) for election information. That source's information should be specific to each election and regularly updated; it should also provide data and evidence regarding the security and integrity of the election.
- Ensure that all votes cast are on auditable paper records. Post-election audits should be conducted after each election.

## 7.3 Media

Traditional media remains the primary means of information distribution in the United States. As such, newsrooms have an obligation, rooted in traditional journalism ethics and practices, to accurately and ethically cover election topics, including election misinformation. This task has been complicated by a loss of journalism revenue to social media companies and growing competition with hyperpartisan news sources for reader attention. The following recommendations are for journalists and media professionals covering election-related misinformation.

### Newsrooms

- Prepare journalists to encounter mis- and disinformation. This training should include accepted definitions, attribution standards, how to avoid inadvertent amplification, and more.
- Coordinate reporting across beats in the newsroom. Election reporting relies on a combination of campaign embeds, White House and congressional



#### 7.4. Social Media Platforms and Technology Companies

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reporters, national security reporters, technology reporters, and others. Organizations should handle misinformation uniformly and professionally.

- Anticipate misinformation (“threatcasting”) and establish guidelines for combating it (for example, the *Washington Post*’s guidance on hacked material or BuzzFeed’s guidance on QAnon descriptions).<sup>4</sup>
- Formulate proactive communications for instances when genuine reporting is labeled “fake news” or disinformation. Newsrooms should address the issue but not accept the premise of the charge.
- For written media, avoid headlines that mischaracterize or hyperbolize reporting, especially in breaking news events like elections. Include the fact-check in the headline when possible, e.g., “Trump Falsely Declared Victory.”

### News Studies and Research

- Develop a wider vocabulary for differentiating between traditional news media and hyperpartisan or unreliable news. A new lexicon could help social media sites better label information.
- Develop case studies on misinformation coverage (good and bad) of the 2020 election to educate and inform current and upcoming journalists.

## 7.4 Social Media Platforms and Technology Companies

In their relatively brief existence, social media platforms have become a critical part of the democratic process, facilitating political organizing, citizen engagement, campaign communications, and overall information access. Mitigating election-related misinformation in this space is particularly challenging given the distributed nature of the social media ecosystem—anyone with internet access can consume content and post their own—and the speed by which unverified or unverifiable information can spread. As it stands, there is a high degree of variance in how social media platforms address misinformation, the resources they devote to combating it, and their technical policy options. Social media platforms won’t be able to root out election-related misinformation entirely, but these policy recommendations can help. The following recommendations for platforms are more lengthy and specific than previous sections because this area currently has the fewest normative practices compared to the others.

## 7. Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

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### **Accessibility**

- Tell users about a platform's misinformation policies. In addition to the policies themselves, platforms should provide both rationales and case studies. Policies specific to an event or topic (e.g., elections, COVID-19) should be grouped in one location.
- Provide proactive information regarding anticipated election misinformation. For example, if researchers expect a narrative will emerge, platforms should explain that narrative's history or provide fact-checks or context related to its prior iterations.

### **Transparency**

- Share platform research on misinformation counter-measures with academics, civil society and the public. Where counter-measures have been effective, reveal that; where they have fallen short, reveal that as well. If efficacy is unknown, take steps to determine it.
- Enable access for external researchers to removed or labeled content, including exhaustive and rapid search capabilities.
- Partner with civil society organizations. Listen to their suggestions and support them when possible.
- Provide greater transparency about why something is removed or censored. Sharing the evidence to support why the content was taken down would be helpful for researchers as well as the public.

### **Cross-Platform Communications**

- Support independent cross-platform coalitions that track cross-platform misinformation. These coalitions can focus on specific topics (such as vaccine disinformation) or regions and can coordinate with government officials and civil society to respond to growing narratives.

### **Policy on Repeat Spreaders**

- Establish clear consequences for accounts that repeatedly violate platform policies. These accounts could be placed on explicit probationary status, or a mixture of monitoring and sanctions.

#### 7.4. Social Media Platforms and Technology Companies

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- Publicize the different thresholds of policy offenses. For example, YouTube and Twitter use a strike system. Any such system should transparently represent to users their current status and should describe what counts as a strike against monetization, or leads to suspension.
- Prioritize quicker action on verified or influential accounts if they have already violated platform policies in the past.
- Consider implementing holding areas for content from high-visibility repeat spreaders, where content can be evaluated against policy before posting.
- Reevaluate policies related to blue-check influencers with significant reach, particularly on issues such as incitement to violence. These accounts should arguably be held more stringently to stated policies than the average user—rather than receiving repeated exemptions—because of the amount of attention they command and action they potentially drive.

### Policy Enforcement

- Ensure platform labels are consistently applied to all product features, including ephemeral content such as stories or livestreams.
- Labels should make clear which policy the content violates.
- Partner with civil society organizations to localize fact-checks and labels, especially in non-English languages or niche communities.
- Apply an interim label to content that is in the queue for fact-checkers, or is tied to an emerging event, noting that it should be approached with caution. For content that recurs, a label can link to a page that discusses previous variations of the claim.
- Anticipate misinformation where possible, particularly surrounding pivotal events such as elections. Revisit applicable policies in advance.

### Election-Specific Policies

- Specify election-specific policies' duration and geographic jurisdiction.
- For US elections, anticipate state-level premature claims of victory.
- Prioritize election officials' efforts to educate voters within their jurisdiction and respond to misinformation. This could include the promotion of content from election officials through curation or advertisement credits, especially in the lead-up to Election Day.

## 7. Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

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### 7.5 Civil Society

Civil society in the United States plays an essential role in the process and functions of elections, as well as in the accountability of institutions directly responsible for the stewardship of American democracy and the information environment that facilitates it. Civil society includes a wide range of actors from academia, public interest groups, community leaders, faith-based groups, and other non-governmental organizations. Most notably, civil society has led in providing better understanding and best practices regarding election-related misinformation and can continue to play a leading role in building resilience to it in the long term.

#### Overarching

- Disclose methodology and standards for technical research. Incomplete, misleading, or false findings, even when well intentioned, often exacerbate the problem, especially in fast-moving information environments around elections.
- Similar to the recommendation made to media organizations, increase awareness about misinformation and coordinate among civil society groups with varied expertise on elections.
- Where misinformation is pervasive and touches on many topics, clearly communicate the scope of engagement on the issue. As an example, the Election Integrity Partnership's scope was narrowly focused on misinformation related to the process and results of the 2020 US elections, as opposed to false information in American political discourse more broadly.

### 7.6 Conclusion

The 2020 election demonstrated that actors—both foreign and domestic—remain committed to weaponizing viral false and misleading narratives to undermine confidence in the US electoral system and Americans' faith in our democracy. Mis- and disinformation warped the country's public discourse both before and after Election Day, spreading through online communities across all social platforms. Influencers and hyperpartisan media cultivated loyal, polarized audiences, forming echo chambers where narratives of massive fraud and a stolen election strengthened at each retelling. These narratives have consequences. On January 6, 2021, President Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol in an attempt to prevent the finalization of the Electoral College results and the peaceful transition of power. A small group of radicalized citizens had been repeatedly

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7.6. Conclusion

told that the election's results were fraudulent; they mobilized against their own democracy while claiming to protect it. A larger group watched those events and cheered; others concluded, despite MAGA hats and Trump flags, that the insurrection was the work of their political opponents.

State and local election officials throughout the country and across the political spectrum worked hard to counter malign narratives. Tragedies such as the January 6 insurrection suggest that, despite their best efforts, democratic processes remain vulnerable. The events, narratives, and dynamics documented in this report underscore the need for a collective response to the false and misleading narratives that precipitated the attack.

The EIP was formed out of this conviction—that the challenge of misinformation is dynamic, networked, and resilient—and that to address it, we need to act quickly and collectively. While the Partnership was intended to meet an immediate need, the conditions that necessitated its creation have not abated, and in fact may have gotten worse. Academia, platforms, civil society, and all levels of government must be committed, in their own ways, to truth in the service of a free and open society. All stakeholders should focus on predicting and pre-bunking false narratives, detecting mis- and disinformation as it occurs, and countering it when appropriate.

The EIP's collaborative model was tailored toward a specific event—Election 2020—and designed specifically to aid election officials, election security stakeholders, and civil society, but we believe the model could have further utility. As our report reiterates, there are structural dynamics and policy frameworks in the online information ecosystem that have long lent themselves to the viral spread of false and misleading information and to the facilitation of polarized communities; addressing specific content is, in many ways, secondary to addressing these infrastructure challenges. In the meantime, false and misleading narratives proliferate about a wide variety of societally impactful topics. Shifting focus to address specific other topics may require modification to the operation of the Partnership, such as reallocating analytical resources and research cadence; however, EIP's novel structure, enabling rapid-response analysis and a multi-stakeholder reporting infrastructure, could prove effective to many information spaces blighted by pervasive misinformation.

In the end, we hope this report's enduring value lies not just in its exposition of this election story, but in its illumination of this overarching story—of declining trust, weakened gatekeepers, social polarization, and the protean challenge of viral misinformation amidst a skeptical and networked public. Given the enormity of the challenge, we recognize the need for a whole-of-society response. The EIP, in its structure and its operations, offered a first measure in service of that call: it united government, academia, civil society, and industry, analyzing across platforms, to address misinformation in real time. The lessons from EIP

## 7. Responses, Mitigations and Future Work

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should be both learned and applied. The fight against misinformation is only beginning. The collective effort must continue.

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## Notes

1. (page 234) Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, S. Rep. No. 116-XX, volume 2, at 78 (2019), [https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report\\_Volume2.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf)
2. (page 235) “#Protect2020 Rumor vs. Reality,” Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.cisa.gov/rumorcontrol>
3. (page 235) Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, S. Rep. No. 116-XX, volumes 3 and 5 (2019), <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures>
4. (page 237) Joe Pompeo, “‘Connect the Dots’: Marty Baron Warns Washington Post Staff About Covering Hacked Materials,” *Vanity Fair*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/09/marty-baron-warns-wapo-staff-about-covering-hacked-materials>; Drusilla Moorhouse and Emerson Malone, “Here’s Why BuzzFeed News is Calling QAnon a ‘Collective Delusion’ From Now On,” BuzzFeed News, September 4, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/drumoorhouse/qanon-mass-collective-delusion-buzzfeed-news-copy-desk>





## Appendix **A**

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### Definitions

**Misinformation** is information that is false, but not necessarily intentionally false.<sup>1</sup> Misinformation is at times used as an umbrella category for false rumors, disinformation, and other types of false and misleading information.

**Disinformation** is false or misleading information that is purposefully seeded and/or spread for an objective—e.g., a political or financial objective.<sup>2</sup> Disinformation may mislead through its content, or may work by deceiving its audiences about its origins, purpose, or the identity of those who produced it. It is often built around a true or plausible core, layering factual information with small falsehoods or exaggerations (see Bittman, 1985).<sup>3</sup> It also typically functions as a campaign—a set of information actions, rather than a single piece of content. The key difference between disinformation and other forms of misinformation is intent, in that disinformation is intentionally produced and/or spread. Often as a disinformation campaign progresses, it incorporates unwitting participants in its production and spread; therefore, not every entity that spreads disinformation does so with intent to deceive or knowledge that they are spreading false or misleading content.<sup>4</sup>

**Voter Fraud** is the act of fraudulently voting. It includes voting on behalf of someone else, voting when someone is ineligible, voting multiple times, etc. The

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<sup>1</sup>Caroline Jack, “Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information,” *Data & Society Research Institute* (2017): 3, 22, [https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety\\_LexiconofLies.pdf](https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Jack, “Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information”; Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, “Disinformation as collaborative work: Surfacing the participatory nature of strategic information operations,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, issue CSCW (November 2019): 1-26, [doi.org/10.1145/3359229](https://doi.org/10.1145/3359229).

<sup>3</sup>Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View*; Kate Starbird, et al., “Disinformation as collaborative work.”

## A. Definitions

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term is often used—including within examples in this report—as a catchall for other types of election fraud. Research shows that voter fraud is extremely rare in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

**Election Fraud** suggests a more systematic effort to change the results of an election. It includes orchestrating voter fraud at scale, illegally registering or illegally assisting large numbers of voters, altering vote counts through automatic or manual means, systematically removing or inserting large numbers of ballots to affect an election outcome, etc.

**Electoral Fraud** is a broad term denoting “illegal interference in the process of voting.”<sup>6</sup> Electoral fraud includes ballot stuffing, voter impersonation, vote buying, voter suppression, fraud by election officials, and various other mechanisms of illegally impacting an election. Like “election fraud,” electoral fraud suggests efforts at a scale that could impact election results.

**Voter Suppression** is the process of systematically reducing the ability of a specific group of people to vote. It can work through efforts to make it physically harder to vote (fewer locations, limited time windows), through legal efforts that disenfranchise specific groups (e.g., former felons) and through other mechanisms, including intimidation. In the United States, voter suppression efforts often target Black Americans and other people of color.<sup>7</sup>

**Tickets** were internal reports within the EIP system. They were submitted via “tips” from external partners in the government and civil society, or created through the EIP internal monitoring process. Once a ticket was submitted, our Tier 1 analysts would go through a systematic process to document the claim, determine if it was “in scope,” get a sense of where it was spreading, and attempt to assess the veracity of the underlying claims by locating an external fact-check from election officials, fact-checking organizations, local media, or mainstream outlets. For high priority, in-scope tickets, Tier 2 researchers conducted additional analysis, which included determining the origins of a piece of information, tracking its spread over time, and identifying additional fact-checks as they became available.

A majority of tickets focused on false and/or misleading claims that functioned to diminish trust in election results. These included:

- False claims and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories (e.g., that voting software switches votes without a trace).

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<sup>5</sup>“Debunking the Voter Fraud Myth,” Brennan Center for Justice, January 31, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/debunking-voter-fraud-myth>.

<sup>6</sup>Ballotpedia, s.v. “Electoral Fraud,” accessed February 10, 2021, [https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral\\_fraud](https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral_fraud).

<sup>7</sup>ACLU, “Block the Vote: Voter Suppression in 2020,” February 3, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/>.

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- Factually valid claims taken out of context and framed in misleading ways to suggest massive voter fraud (e.g., that a large number of ballots had been found in a trash can, when in actuality the ballots were from 2018).
  - Content that amplified and exaggerated small issues (e.g., ballots stolen from a mailbox, discarded mail that contained a small number of ballots, issues with individual voting machines) to support the broader (false) narrative that results could not be trusted.

**Events** are salient occurrences in our physical and/or social worlds. Events are typically bounded in time. We use this term to distinguish between the actual event (e.g., Sharpie pens bleeding through ballots) and the information incidents that feature elements of those events—though they may take shape and spread at different times.

**(Information) Incidents** are distinct information cascades that pertain to a specific event or set of events. We use the term incidents to differentiate between the original event and the subsequent discussion or discussions of that event. Incidents often map to one or more narratives, where the details of an event are mobilized to create or support a specific interpretation—or story about the meaning—of that event.

**Narratives** are stories that connect a series of related events or experiences. Like any good story, narratives typically have characters, scenes, times, and themes. They provide compelling interpretations that can help people make sense of events and experiences.

**Frames** are mental schema that shape how people interpret events. Frames select and make salient some aspects of a situation—and obscure others. Robert Entman enumerates four functions of frames: defining a problem, diagnosing a cause, making a moral judgement, and suggesting remedies.<sup>8</sup> Framing is the act of creating, refining, or challenging a frame. Framing can be used as a strategy to shape how others interpret a situation.

**The “Big Lie”:** Over the course of this project, a majority of the tickets we filed and incidents we analyzed were related to a false metanarrative of massive voter fraud (i.e., election fraud). This false metanarrative was introduced prior to our project’s launch and continues to this day. It was present in President Trump’s summer 2020 tweets claiming that the election would be “rigged” against him and in his January 6, 2021, tweets claiming that the election had been stolen from him. It took shape through a variety of false, misleading, and exaggerated claims that functioned generally to sow distrust in the results—and specifically to

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<sup>8</sup>Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1993): 51-58; doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

## A. Definitions

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support the allegation of massive voter fraud functioning to “steal” the election from candidate Trump. Looking across the breadth of the online activity to seed and spread these narratives, our research (and that of others; see Benkler et al.’s 2020 paper<sup>9</sup>) has interpreted the “Big Lie” to be a participatory disinformation campaign that incorporated the efforts of President Trump, his family and close supporters, members of right-wing media, social media influencers, and his followers (many of them unwitting participants in this campaign).

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<sup>9</sup>Yochai Benkler et al., “Mail-in Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign,” Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2020-6, Berkman Klein Center, October 2, 2020, [doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3703701](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3703701).

Appendix **B****Inter-coder reliability****B.1 Average Z-scores**

<b>Survey Questions (in descending order by z-score)</b>	<b>Z Score</b>
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	1.013260305
Why was this ticket created?	0.5973125198
Was there a partisan focus on this ticket?	0.04870033315
Process-based tags: what part of the electoral process is this ticket about?	0.04149633474
Specific Claims or Election-related narratives: is there a specific, recognizable claim that was used in this incident?	0.03772808942
What are the top-level buckets of this incident? Check all that apply.	-0.08453405504
What tactics were used to spread this content?	-0.203993765
What is the estimated number of engagements (cumulative social media shares, retweets, likes, reactions, comments) associated with the ticket?	-0.2505426778
Character-based Tags: who or what is being implicated in this incident?	-0.2664116253
Is this a particularly important ticket that should be included in the final report?	-0.7143693447

Table B.1: The average z-scores for each survey question

## B. Inter-coder reliability

**B.2 Discordant Z-scores**

Survey Question	Choice	Z Score
What tactics were used to spread this content?	This content exaggerates the impact of an issue within the election-process	-2.868919023
Specific Claims or Election-related narratives: is there a specific, recognizable claim that was used in this incident?	None of the above	-2.41007974
Character-based Tags: who or what is being implicated in this incident?	Government Entities	-1.971189991
What are the top-level buckets of this incident? Check all that apply.	Fraud	-1.951240456
Character-based Tags: who or what is being implicated in this incident?	Political affinity group	-1.911341388

Table B.2: From the above questions, choices that experienced the most discord among coders

**B.3 Concordant Z-scores**

Survey Question	Choice	Z Score
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	Foreign interference (Unfounded)	1.240684993
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	Foreign interference (Confirmed)	1.220735459
Other Facets: was there anything else notable about this ticket not already covered above?	COVID related	1.200785925
What tactics were used to spread this content?	Use of phishing emails or tests	1.180836391
What are the top-level buckets of this incident? Check all that apply.	Premature Claims of Victory	1.140937323

Table B.3: Questions that experienced the most agreement



Appendix **C**

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## **Repeat Spreaders— Additional Partisan News Outlets in the Twitter Data**

The *New York Post*'s coverage served mainly to introduce narratives involving election fraud, including reporting on unfounded allegations that deceased voters in New York had ballots cast on their behalf. Conservative news outlets DC Patriot (9 incidents) and National Pulse (8 incidents) acted similarly in the promotion of stories revolving around misplaced ballots (DC Patriot) and detailing previous instances of fraud both domestic and foreign (National Pulse).

JustTheNews, a news site run by conservative commentator John Solomon, produced stories that applied political commentary to narratives asserting election fraud and was involved in spreading the Nevada Whistleblower narrative. URLs from the *Washington Times* appear in tweets related to three of the top incidents, reflecting their attention to widely followed election conspiracy theories.

Domains associated with political conspiracy theories include ZeroHedge, which appeared in 10 incidents, which was involved in the spread of the Color Revolution narrative. *The Epoch Times* was cited in a range of misleading “voter fraud” narratives such as alleging that large numbers of people were voting twice and that discarded ballots were evidence of intentional fraud. The website also promoted content related to three large incidents—the Dominion conspiracy theory, and the Sharpiegate and Stop The Steal narratives.

The Fox News website, foxnews.com, was cited in a narrative regarding ballots that went missing in the care of USPS and the spread of Biden's mis-contextualized statement regarding fraud protections. Articles for which Fox News was cited often presented factual evidence of a real-world event with an

C. Repeat Spreaders—Additional Partisan News Outlets in the Twitter Data

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underlying subtext of election insecurity or widespread voter fraud that was picked up and made more explicit in the social media sphere. The spin-off site of Fox contributor Sara Carter ([saraacarter.com](http://saraacarter.com)) was involved in seven similar incidents resulting in over 80,000 retweets. Her content was often more explicit in falsely claiming widespread voter fraud—including a highly speculative article (now removed) that helped to feed the Dominion conspiracy theory.

## Appendix **D**

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# Ticket Analysis Questions

## D.1 Tier 1 Analysis Questions

**1: Overall Analyst Description:** What is the content about? Provide a brief description of the narrative being pushed and the tactics used to spread it (platforms, assets, etc.) so that other analysts can understand the content at a glance.

**2: Platform:** What platform(s) does the content appear on? Include links or links to screenshots, if appropriate. What platforms has the content trended on?

**3: Language:** What language(s) is the content written in?

**4: Content Assets:** What type of media is included in the content?

*Examples:*

Contains video

Contains image with text

Contains image without text

Template text (copy-paste)

Unique text

**5a: Category:** What EIP-defined categories of election interference does it fall under?

*Choose all that apply:*

Procedural Interference

#### D. Ticket Analysis Questions

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Participation Interference

Fraud

Delegitimization\*

**5b:** \*If it's delegitimization, what kind is it?

**6: Theme:** What is the primary topic or theme of the content?

*Examples:* VoteByMail

USPS

**7: Target Community:** What specific communities does the content target (if applicable)?

*This refers to the community whose voting ability or trust in the election process the content is designed to affect—not the community propagating the claim. Target communities can include seniors, teenagers, Latinx voters, QAnon, far left, far right, etc.*

**8: State Targeted:** What geographical area [state] does the content target (if applicable)?

**9: Account Type or Amplification:** What kind of account is primarily responsible for spreading the content?

*Examples:*

Politician/candidate for office

Influencer/verified account

Organic account

Seemingly inauthentic account

Anonymous account

**10: Reach:** What is the reach of the content at this time?

*How many shares does it have? How many replies or comments? How many likes? Use the following as approximate guidelines:*

- None: 0 engagements

## D.2. Tier 2 Analysis Questions

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- Low: 1-10 engagements
- Medium: 10-500 engagements
- High: 500-1000 engagements
- Viral: 1000+ engagements

**11: Velocity:** What is the velocity of the content?

*Is the rate of spread of the content static, growing, or declining? Use the following as approximate guidelines:*

- Static: no change to reach
- Growing: reach is growing linearly
- Viral: reach is growing exponentially
- Decreasing: reach is decreasing

## D.2 Tier 2 Analysis Questions

**12: What else do we know about the primary account sharing the content?**

*Examples:*

25,000 followers  
Created in 2012

**13: What communities are sharing the content?**

*Examples:*

Conspiratorial Instagram pages, Bernie-aligned Facebook groups

**14: What was the first account or Page to share the content (if not the account listed above)?**

**15: Is there any evidence of coordination or inauthentic activity? Unusual tactics?**

**16: To what extent is counter-messaging already underway? Has it been successful?**

**16: Any additional notes about the user and related social accounts/websites discussed in the ticket?**



Appendix **E**

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## News Articles Citing the Election Integrity Partnership

News Articles citing the EIP during the active project period, listed in chronological order:

**Route Fifty** | Aug. 12, 2020: “New Coalition Wants to Help in Fight Against Election Misinformation”

<https://www.route-fifty.com/tech-data/2020/08/election-integrity-partnership-misinformation-disinformation/167666/>

**Stanford News** | Sept. 28, 2020: “The 2020 U.S. election, issues and challenges”

<https://news.stanford.edu/2020/09/28/2020-u-s-election-issues-challenges/>

**The New York Times** | Sept. 28, 2020: “Editorial: What’s the Plan if Trump Tweets That He’s Won Re-election?”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/27/opinion/social-media-trump-election.html>

**The New York Times** | Sept. 29, 2020: “Project Veritas Video Was a ‘Coordinated Disinformation Campaign,’ Researchers Say”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/project-veritas-ilhan-omar.html>

**Santa Rosa Press-Democrat** | Sept. 30, 2020: “A tall tale about election fraud”

<https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/opinion/pd-editorial-a-tall-tale-about-election-fraud/>

**Bloomberg News** | Oct. 5, 2020: “Facebook, Twitter Are Failing to Curb Voting-By-Mail Falsehoods”

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-05/facebook-twitter-are-failing-to-curb-voting-by-mail-falsehoods>



E. News Articles Citing the Election Integrity Partnership

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Appendix **F**

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## Methodology for Evaluating Platform Policy

In total, we evaluated 15 different platforms<sup>1</sup> across four categories meant to partition the space of potential problematic content and behavior: the mechanics of the election (Procedural Interference), the voters themselves (Participation Interference), encouragement of fraud (Fraud), and casting doubt on the integrity of the election outcome. (Delegitimization of Election Results). The definitions of these categories are detailed in Chapter 1.

We first determined if the platform stated in its community guidelines whether it would address election-related content on its platform. While the platforms that don't have election-related policies—Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch— may use existing policies to address content such as the encouragement of fraud, we cannot properly evaluate them in an election-related context. We then rated each platform's policies as either “None,” “Non-Comprehensive,” or “Comprehensive,” depending on how specifically it addresses the content type:

- None: The platform has no explicit policy or stance on the issue.
- Non-Comprehensive: Policy in this category contains indirect language, or uses broad “umbrella” language, such that it is not clear what type of election misinformation and disinformation the policy covers. This is also reserved for policies that give one detailed example such that they cover some, but not all, of a subject.

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<sup>1</sup>The platforms we evaluated are: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Nextdoor, TikTok, Snapchat, Parler, Gab, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, and Twitch. Twitch was added to the list of platforms we evaluated during our blog post update in October.

## F. Methodology for Evaluating Platform Policy

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- **Comprehensive:** Policy in this category uses direct language and is clear on what type of election misinformation and disinformation the policy covers. It also sufficiently covers the full breadth of the category.

For each of the categories, we defined “Comprehensive” to be:

- **Procedural:** The policy specifies time, place, or manner (e.g., voting in person and by mail).
- **Participation:** The policy specifies it will address posts that include intimidation to personal safety or deterrence to participation in the election process, which can be both violent and non-violent.
- **Fraud:** The policy specifies it will address posts that encourage participating in the election in an illegal way.
- **Delegitimization of Election Results:** The policy specifies it will address claims that attempt to delegitimize the election.

The tables in this report have slightly different policy ratings under the category of fraud from when we first published our analysis in August 2020. There were many unfounded claims of “election fraud,” but we determined that this fell into the larger category of delegitimization of election results. Our fraud category is therefore scoped solely around claims that encourage people to commit fraud—which appeared only a handful of times during our monitoring period. Many platforms, including those without election-related policies, have terms of service policies and community standards that state the promotion of illegal activity is not allowed on its platform. However, only Facebook and Pinterest explicitly state that the encouragement of voter fraud is not allowed on their platforms and therefore received a rating of “Comprehensive.”

Over the four months of the EIP’s operation, we updated our platform evaluations to account for policy changes made by the platforms. We frequently checked for changes in platforms’ community guidelines and followed the platforms’ blog posts, which we considered to be policy statements even though some of these updates weren’t formally incorporated into the platforms’ community guidelines. We did not consider policy changes that were stated to the press, or on social media by executives or employees of the platform. Below is a table of the corresponding policies for each platform. The colors correspond to new policies that were introduced between August 2020 and October 28, 2020.

## Facebook

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Misrepresentation of the dates, locations, and times, and methods for voting or voter registration or census participation.”  “Misrepresentation of who can vote, qualifications for voting, whether a vote will be counted, and what information and/or materials must be provided in order to vote.”  “Calls for coordinated interference that would affect an individual's ability to participate in the census or an election.”  Facebook will remove implicit misrepresentations about voting that may “mislead you about what you need to do to get a ballot.” [Sept. 03]</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle; policies updated are shown in red):</b>  “Any content containing statements of intent, calls for action, <b>conditional or aspirational statements</b>, or advocating for <b>high or mid-severity violence</b> due to voting, voter registration, or the <b>administration or outcome of an election.</b>” [Sept. 03]  “Content stating that census or voting participation may or will result in law enforcement consequences (e.g., arrest, deportation, imprisonment).”  “Content claiming that the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is at a voting location.” [Sept. 03]  “Calls for coordinated interference that would affect an individual's ability to participate in an election.”  “Explicit claims that people will be infected by COVID (or another communicable disease) if they participate in the voting process.” [Sept. 03]  “Statements of intent or advocacy, calls to action, or aspirational or conditional statements to bring weapons to locations, including but not limited to places of worship, educational facilities, <b>polling places, or locations used to count votes or administer an election*</b> (or encouraging others to do the same).”  *“For the following content, we may require more information and/or context in order to enforce: Threats against election officials.” [Sept. 03]</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Offers to buy or sell votes with cash or gifts.”  “Statements that advocate, provide instructions or show explicit intent to illegally participate in a voting or census process.”  Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):  “We will attach an informational label to content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the election or discuss the legitimacy of voting methods, for example, by claiming that lawful methods of voting will lead to fraud. This label will provide basic authoritative information about the integrity of the election and voting methods.” [Sept. 03]  “Importantly, if any candidate or campaign tries to declare victory before the results are in, we'll add a label to their post educating that official results are not yet in and directing people to the official results.” [Sept. 03]  “Other misrepresentations related to voting in an official election or census participation may be subject to false news standards, as referenced in section 20” (now section 21).</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b>  “We will attach an informational label to content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the election or discuss the legitimacy of voting methods, for example, by claiming that lawful methods of voting will lead to fraud. This label will provide basic authoritative information about the integrity of the election and voting methods.” [Sept. 03]  “Importantly, if any candidate or campaign tries to declare victory before the results are in, we'll add a label to their post educating that official results are not yet in and directing people to the official results.” [Sept. 03]  “Other misrepresentations related to voting in an official election or census participation may be subject to false news standards, as referenced in section 20” (now section 21).</p>

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## Twitter

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Misleading information about procedures to participate in a civic process (for example, that you can vote by Tweet, text message, email, or phone call in jurisdictions where these are not a possibility).”  “Misleading information about requirements for participation, including identification or citizenship requirements.”  “Misleading statements or information about the official, announced date or time of a civic process.”  “Misleading claims that polling places are closed, that polling has ended or other misleading information relating to votes not being counted.”  “Misleading claims about long lines, equipment problems, or other disruptions at voting locations during election periods.”  “False or misleading information that causes confusion about the laws and regulations of a civic process, or officials and institutions executing those civic processes.” [Sept. 10]</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Misleading claims about police, or law enforcement activity related to voting in an election, polling places, or collecting census information.”  “Misleading claims about long lines, equipment problems, or other disruptions at voting locations during election periods.” “Misleading claims about process, procedures, or techniques which could dissuade people from participating.”  “Threats regarding voting locations or other key places or events (note that our violent threats policy may also be relevant for threats not covered by this policy).”  Twitter will remove “Tweets that encourage violence or call for people to interfere with election results or smooth operation of polling places.” [Oct. 9]  “Tweets meant to incite interference with the election process or with the implementation of election results, such as through violent action, will be subject to removal. This covers all Congressional races and the Presidential Election.” [Oct. 9]</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Illegal or certain regulated goods or services: You may not use our service for any unlawful purpose or in furtherance of illegal activities. This includes selling, buying, or facilitating transactions in illegal goods or services, as well as certain types of regulated goods or services.”</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b>  “Misleading claims that polling places are closed, that polling has ended or other misleading information relating to votes not being counted.”  “We also consider whether the context in which media are shared could result in confusion or misunderstanding or suggests a deliberate intent to deceive people about the nature or origin of the content, for example by falsely claiming that it depicts reality.”  “Disputed claims that could undermine faith in the process itself, e.g. unverified information about election rigging, ballot tampering, vote tallying, or certification of election results.” [Sept. 10]  “Misleading claims about the results or outcome of a civic process which calls for or could lead to interference with the implementation of the results of the process, e.g. claiming victory before election results have been certified, inciting unlawful conduct to prevent a peaceful transfer of power or orderly succession.” [Oct. 9]  “People on Twitter, including candidates for office, may not claim an election win before it is authoritatively called. To determine the results of an election in the US, we require either an announcement from state election officials, or a public projection from at least two authoritative, national news outlets that make independent election calls. Tweets which include premature claims will be labeled and direct people to our official US election page.” [Oct. 9]</p>

## YouTube

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Content aiming to mislead voters about the time, place, means or eligibility requirements for voting, <b>or false claims that could materially discourage voting.</b>”  “Incitement to interfere with democratic processes: content encouraging others to interfere with democratic processes, such as obstructing or interrupting voting procedures.”  Examples of content not to post:  • “Deliberately telling viewers an incorrect election date.”  • “Telling viewers they can vote through fake methods like texting their vote to a particular number.”  • “Giving made up voter eligibility requirements like saying that a particular election is only open to voters over 50 years old.”  • <b>“we remove content falsely claiming that mail-in ballots have been manipulated to change the results of an election”</b></p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b>  “Content aiming to mislead voters about the time, place, means or eligibility requirements for voting, <b>or false claims that could materially discourage voting.</b>”  “Incitement to interfere with democratic processes: content encouraging others to interfere with democratic processes, such as obstructing or interrupting voting procedures.”  Examples of content not to post:  • Telling viewers to create long voting lines with the purpose of making it harder for others to vote  • <b>“Claiming that a voter’s political party affiliation is visible on a vote-by-mail envelope.”</b></p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  “Don’t post content on YouTube if it fits any of the descriptions noted below. Instructional theft or cheating: Showing viewers how to steal tangible goods or promoting dishonest behavior”</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>  Manipulated Media:  “Content that has been technically manipulated or doctored in a way that misleads users (beyond clips taken out of context) and may pose a serious risk of egregious harm.”  Example: “Misattributing a 10 year old video that depicts stuffing of a ballot box to a recent election.”  Examples of content not to post:  • <b>False claims that non-citizen voting has determined the outcome of past elections.</b>  • <b>Telling viewers to hack government websites to delay the release of elections results</b>  • Manipulated Media:  “Content that has been technically manipulated or doctored in a way that misleads users (beyond clips taken out of context) and may pose a serious risk of egregious harm.”</p>

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**Pinterest**

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
<b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):</b> “False or misleading information about the dates, times, locations and procedure for voting or census participation.” “Content that misleads voters about how to correctly fill-out and submit a ballot, including a mail-in ballot, or census form.” [Sept. 3]	<b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b> “False or misleading content that impedes an election’s integrity or an individual’s or group’s civic participation, including registering to vote, voting, and being counted in a census.” “False or misleading information about public safety that is intended to deter people from exercising their right to vote or participate in a census.” “False or misleading information about who can vote or participate in the census and what information must be provided to participate.” “False or misleading statements about who is collecting information and/or how it will be used.” “Threats against voting locations, census or voting personnel, voters or census participants, including intimidation of vulnerable or protected group voters or participants.” [Sept. 3]	<b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b> “Content that encourages or instructs voters or participants to misrepresent themselves or illegally participate” [Sept. 3]	<b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b> “Content apparently intended to delegitimize election results on the basis of false or misleading claims.” [Sept. 3]

## Nextdoor

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from Comprehensive):</b>  <del>"Bans any inaccurate content about the time, place, means, or eligibility requirements to vote in any local or national elections in the U.S."</del>            "False or misleading information that could prevent or discourage people from voting, cause their votes not to be counted, or interfere with the election process."</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):</b>            "False or misleading information that could prevent or discourage people from voting, cause their votes not to be counted, or interfere with the election process."</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>            "When offering or seeking goods or services on Nextdoor, make sure that you're complying with local laws and not engaging in illegal transactions."</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):</b>            "False or misleading information that could prevent or discourage people from voting, cause their votes not to be counted, or interfere with the election process."            "False or misleading claims about the results of an election that could lead to interference with the election process."</p>

## TikTok

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>            "Content that misleads community members about elections or other civic processes."            "Claims relating to polling stations on election day that have not yet been verified."            "Content that misrepresents the date of an election." [Oct. 7]</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from None):</b>            "Attempts to intimidate voters or suppress voting."            TikTok will redirect search results with terms associated with "incitement to violence."            TikTok will block future livestreaming from an account whose livestream "seeks to incite violence or promote hateful ideologies, conspiracies, or disinformation."            TikTok will add a banner pointing viewers to our election guide content with..."attempts to dissuade people from voting by exploiting COVID-19 as a voter suppression tactic." [Oct. 7]</p>	<p><b>Non-Comprehensive (Rating did not change during election cycle):</b>            "Content may be removed if it relates to activities or goods that are regulated or illegal in the majority of the region or world, even if the activities or goods in question are legal in the jurisdiction of posting."</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive (Rating changed from Non-Comprehensive):</b>            "False claims that seek to erode trust in public institutions, such as claims of voter fraud resulting from voting by mail or claims that your vote won't count." [Oct. 7]            "Content that misleads community members about elections or other civic processes."            "Reviewed content that shares unverified claims, such as a premature declaration of victory before results are confirmed." [Oct. 7]</p>

## F. Methodology for Evaluating Platform Policy

**Snapchat**

Procedural Interference	Participation Interference	Fraud	Delegitimization of Election Results
Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from No election-related policies): "We prohibit spreading false information that causes harm or is malicious, such as denying the existence of tragic events, unsubstantiated medical claims, or undermining the integrity of civic processes."	None	Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from No election-related policies): We prohibit the promotion and use of certain regulated goods, as well as the depiction or promotion of criminal activities.	Non-Comprehensive (Rating changed from No election-related policies): "We prohibit spreading false information that causes harm or is malicious, such as denying the existence of tragic events, unsubstantiated medical claims, or undermining the integrity of civic processes."

**F.1 Assessing our methodology**

The purpose of this framework is to provide a clear visualization of civic integrity policies across multiple social media platforms, and to create a single standard upon which all platforms could be evaluated. The community guidelines and terms of service that moderate user content vary widely among platforms, and do not use standardized vocabulary. By directly comparing the language of multiple platforms, the framework provides insight into the policies of each platform. This allowed our analysis to act as an advocate for specific policy recommendations at a platform level by highlighting existing shortfalls. Finally, the framework is intended to be a resource for civil society, academia, and citizens to understand what election-related speech popular platforms moderate.

At the same time, there are limitations to this methodology that are equally important to reflect on. First, the framework doesn't consider that each platform functions differently in the information environment. For example, we didn't explore whether messaging platforms such as WhatsApp should have different policies from a video platform like YouTube when it comes to election-related content.

Second, this framework's rating system was centered on policy language and not how these policies were applied in practice, which may give a misleading impression that one platform is better than another in mitigating misinformation and disinformation. Although many platform policies are accessible to the general public, platforms also have internal guidance specifying more nuances of their externally facing rules, including deciding how to apply these policies. The opacity of platform decision-making serves as another limitation to the accuracy of our framework; for example, some gaps we identified in platform policies could be accounted for by internal mechanisms, or some proficiencies nullified by a company's reluctance to enforce at scale; there may be unknown pitfalls about these policies that we don't see externally.



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F.1. Assessing our methodology

Lastly, as our categories were created before the election, we didn't know how effective they would be in accurately capturing and describing the content that we came across in our monitoring. As we applied these categories in practice, some of them narrowed while others expanded. For example, the category of Fraud presented a challenge to our original definition because the term "fraud" was used broadly to cast doubt on the election. The scope for our fraud category was limited to a strict definition of content that encouraged people to commit fraud. Thus, the unfounded accusations of fraud fell into the Delegitimization category, which, looking back at our data, encompassed the majority of the incidents we monitored. Therefore, in contrast to the specificity we tried to capture in the other categories, Delegitimization as a category became very expansive.

# THE LONG FUSE:

## MISINFORMATION AND THE 2020 ELECTION

**T**he Election Integrity Partnership was officially formed on July 26, 2020 — 100 days before the 2020 presidential election — as a coalition of research entities who would focus on supporting real-time information exchange between the research community, election officials, government agencies, civil society organizations, and social media platforms. The Partnership was formed between four of the nation's leading institutions focused on understanding misinformation in the social media landscape: the Stanford Internet Observatory, Graphika, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, and the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public. This is the final report of their findings.



ISBN 978-1-7367627-1-4

Cover design & illustration:  
Alexander Atkins Design, Inc.